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**Down Mexico Way: Identity, Community and
Deracination in Post-1960s Mexican and
Chicano Cinema**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Dublin for the Degree of Doctor in
Philosophy

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Summary

Pobre de México, tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de los Estados Unidos — popular refrain.

Much attention has been paid to the complex and frequently antagonistic relationship between Mexico and the United States. These neighbouring nations share the longest border in the world and have had close contact over many decades through commercial, political and cultural dealings. There remains a deep distrust of the 'other' in the minds of the inhabitants of each country, however, which has led to negative stereotyping and racism. Hollywood, the creator of North America's national identity to a considerable extent, has not been exempt from the tendency to portray Mexicans in a profoundly unflattering light. Not surprisingly, Mexican cinematographers have sought to counteract such images of their people, both by celebrating their national culture, especially in the golden age era of filmmaking, and by creating their own negative stereotypes of Americans. The depiction of Mexican-Americans in Mexican cinema has proved even more problematic than the portrayal of North Americans, as it is difficult for Mexicans to relate to a people of Mexican origin who inhabit a space between cultures that is neither truly Mexican nor completely North American.

The ambivalent view of Mexicans towards their Mexican-American neighbours was reassessed in the late 1960s. As the celebration of ethnic pride and diversity that emerged in the United States and France spread to Cuba and the rest of Latin America, Mexicans

were forced to take stock of their often dismissive attitude to Mexican-Americans. A further catalyst for change came in the form of the national identity crisis that followed the massacre of hundreds of students after a peaceful protest at Tlatelolco Square, Mexico City. Most commercial Mexican filmmakers ignored the repression and continued to make the formulaic, tawdry films that replaced the idealistic celebrations of national culture produced in the 1940s and 1950s. Others, appalled by the shattering of their nation's progressive image, chose another path, making independent films that addressed the many difficult and contradictory aspects of Mexican life that had been ignored for too long. The 1960s were a period of great opportunity for Mexican-Americans, who learned to see themselves not as a marginalised group but as a community with a unique identity that became a source of pride. As a consequence of this reassessment of their group identity, Mexican-Americans began to represent their distinctive culture on celluloid for the first time. By drawing on early films that dealt with the oppression and marginalisation of their people and by appropriating U.S. film genres, Mexican-Americans sought to create documents that captured their struggles and insecurities as people of two cultures.

The dominance of Hollywood filmmaking and the inevitable comparisons made between North American films and those from other nations mean that the many points of contact between post-1960s Mexican and Chicano cinema have been overlooked. By means of an overview of issues of national identity, community and deracination and through readings of films that explore these issues, this study seeks to redress the balance and to provide an insight into the filmic practices of each community from the key period of the 1960s to the present.

For John, with love and squalor

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Introduction

The principal challenge faced by filmmakers who seek to create an alternative cinema is the difficulty of emerging from the shadow cast by Hollywood. From the moment their respective cinemas were established, Mexican and Mexican-American cinematographers have had to consider the cultural hegemony of the United States. Hollywood films proved immensely popular with Mexican audiences from the moment they were screened, thanks to their extremely high production values and world-renowned stars. During the silent era, Hollywood films provided escapist entertainment and scenarios that could be enjoyed even by illiterate viewers. Those who journeyed North often garnered their initial impressions of the life that awaited them in the United States through the movies. The immense popularity of U.S. films was not neutral, however, as John King points out: “The development of cinema would . . . constantly redefine and reappropriate the popular. In Latin America local producers had to acknowledge as a given the inscription of Hollywood in popular taste.”¹

The immediacy and visual potency of the filmic medium are also potentially problematic. In his seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ Walter Benjamin makes the significant observation that films reduce one’s field of vision by

¹ John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Latin American Cinema*, (London: Verso, 1990), p. 247.

concentrating on specific elements and obscuring the means of their production while giving the impression of portraying a limitless world:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.²

Aware of the paradoxical capacity of film to appear to convey a great deal by focusing on the particular and in a bid to ease potential antagonism aroused by their perceived cultural domination, Hollywood filmmakers went to great lengths to present apparently global stories that appealed across national boundaries. E. Ann Kaplan reflects that even the studios in which films were made sought to employ global motifs:

Part of Hollywood's imaginary self-construction is that it is not a national cinema, but a universal or global one. One can see this on a simple, literal level in the names Hollywood studios give to themselves — like "Paramount" and "Universal" . . . the universal imagery is meant to apply also to the characters and the content of narratives, i.e., that these are universal human stories true all over the world. The globe symbols insist that Hollywood is not about Americans and American life, but about all humans and behavior.³

Despite its veneer of universality, Hollywood created a visual language that encoded

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: Fontana Press, 1992), p. 229.

³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 57.

certain races or ethnic groups in a negatively stereotypical manner. As viewers became attuned to this language, they learned to associate certain racial or behavioural characteristics with stock characters. Benjamin notes that the reproduction of images and their subsequent acceptance as the norm in the minds of the public means that they become conventional:

The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of the visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion.⁴

This observation is significant for both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, for the negative images of each group consumed by North American cinema audiences normalised pernicious depictions of racial and cultural difference. The portrayals of people of Mexican origin in U.S. films were not based on reality or on any understanding of the cultures addressed, but were rather born out of a desire to entertain by denigrating other races and confirming the superiority of white North Americans. During the Second World War, when the United States needed the support of as many allies as possible, it pursued a so-called good neighbour policy that involved the careful avoidance of

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 1992, p. 227.

negative portrayals of Mexico and Mexicans. Ironically, even Hollywood's attempts to depict the country positively relied heavily on stereotypical presentations of fiestas spiced with local colour in the form of generic Latin music. Far more common before and after the war were films that portrayed negative Mexican characters, such as bandits or lazy drunks. Mexican-Americans were typically presented onscreen as greasers or seductive señoritas. Given the wide dissemination of such negative images, it is not surprising that Mexican and Chicano filmmakers turned to cinema in order to address the issues of national identity and cross-cultural interaction. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note:

The cinema, as the world's storyteller *par excellence*, was ideally suited to relay the projected narratives of nations and empires. National self-consciousness, generally seen as a precondition for nationhood — that is, the shared belief of disparate individuals that they share common origins, status, location, and aspirations — became broadly linked to cinematic fictions.⁵

Mexican and Mexican-American films sought to present national discourses that overturned Hollywood's colonialist gaze and the privileging of a North American perspective. The scenario was further complicated, however, by the tensions that existed between each community. Mexicans often despised Mexican-Americans as traitors who had abandoned both their land and their culture, while many Mexican-Americans were insecure as a result of their lack of contact with their Mexican heritage and their subaltern position in their adopted land.

⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 101.

The year 1968, which provides the catalyst for this study, was a pivotal one for both Mexican and Chicano cinema. Mexico was preparing to show the world that it was a progressive, modern nation by hosting the Olympic Games. The nation was abuzz with excitement at the prospect, but activists, especially students, had more important matters on their minds. The Games were being staged in a country notable for the brutal military oppression of students and left-wing intellectuals, who saw a chance to call attention to their plight. A peaceful protest was staged in the Plaza de Tlatelolco in Mexico City only ten days before the beginning of the Games in the hope of attracting coverage by the world press. Instead, the protest was savagely put down by the military, and the fact that hundreds were killed and many more were wounded went largely unreported. This episode shattered public confidence in both the government and in the popular image of Mexico as a modern nation. It led a new generation of filmmakers to question the idealised portrayals of national identity that were so characteristic of the period known as the golden age of Mexican cinema. The disillusionment that followed the Tlatelolco massacre led to a new visual language, as these filmmakers sought to represent the reality of life in Mexico and the truth behind the façade. The influence of Cuban filmmakers, who founded a *nuevo cine* movement in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, was also decisive. Mexican filmmakers created a cinema that was radical both in its willingness to address issues that had been obscured by delightful folkloric images of Mexico and in its frequently innovative formal qualities.

The circumstances that led to the foundation of a Chicano cinema in the late 1960s could scarcely have been more different. Unlike Mexicans, Mexican-Americans did not have a rich cinematic tradition to draw on. The first Chicano films were produced in response to the events in the United States, France and Cuba in the 1960s, where left-wing intellectuals were questioning the status quo and ethnic and racial pride spread. Early Chicano features emphasised the cultural distinctiveness of people of Mexican origin, creating a hybrid image that was very North American in its assertion of individual rights but that looked to Mexico for vestiges of authenticity represented by Aztec civilisation. The result was a concentration on themes that dealt with the difficulties of living between two worlds and of fostering a Chicano identity.

Despite the obvious differences between Mexican and Chicano film practice, the unique circumstances of the 1960s in each country have resulted in the production of post-1960s films that have a great deal in common. There is an emphasis on dealing with uncomfortable issues, identity and nationhood are often debated, while the past is presented as a palimpsest that inspires contemporary generations to value their heritage. The strong influence of U.S. filmmaking on Chicano cinema is no less evident in Mexican cinema, furthermore, as familiar genres are appropriated and reworked in both Mexican and Chicano contexts. The interaction between Mexico and the United States and the situation of Chicanos in the United States frequently give rise to cinematic reflections on cross-cultural matters. Although the overwhelming presence of the United States in the imaginations of each community cannot be discounted, the interactions between the two are often overlooked, an oversight this survey seeks to redress.

This study emerged from an extensive viewing of Mexican features produced by independent filmmakers over the past four decades. This prolific body of work includes such remarkable films as Alberto Isaac's experimental *En este pueblo no hay ladrones*, based on a story by Gabriel García Márquez about a small-town thief and featuring a cameo by Luis Buñuel, who insisted on playing a priest. This is just one example of an outstanding film that was not included in this study because the simultaneous viewing of Mexican and Chicano films led to the emergence of three strikingly consistent themes — identity, the family and migration. These themes formed the basis of a comparative survey that focuses on films that have been exhibited widely or have represented milestones in filmmaking, for it is in the reproduction of the images presented by these films through their screening that their power to construct and represent society lies. Many notable alternative films have been made in the post-1960s period, but the fact that these films are not widely seen means that they represent an underground or avant-garde practice rather than the oppositional countercinema that the films discussed here have created. The thematic approach adopted in this analysis is intended to provide an insight into key concerns that emerge in both Mexican and Chicano films and to demonstrate the divergences and similarities that arise.

The study that follows is essentially divided into two parts, as the first four chapters deal with Mexican cinema, while the next four deal with Chicano cinema. A history of the development of the cinematic practice in each community is provided, with connections

and disparities being suggested throughout by the thematic organisation around the issues of history and national identity, the family and Mexican emigration to the United States.

Chapter One explores the representation of Mexicans in North American film, the history of Mexican cinema and the nationalistic ideology communicated through so-called golden age films such as the 1948 remake of Fernando de Fuentes's classic *Allá en el Rancho Grande*. This film is contrasted with Luis Buñuel's groundbreaking *Los olvidados* (1950), which ushered in a new era of filmmaking through its searing portrayal of urban poverty obscured by positive rural images of Mexico as a prosperous, peaceful state. Taking Octavio Paz's influential thesis on Mexican identity *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) as a starting point, Chapter Two examines the problematic enterprise of forging a national identity among Mexico's racially and socially diverse population. The Mexican Revolution, the massacre in the Plaza de Las Tres Culturas in 1968 and the Conquest are highlighted as the defining events that have shaped Mexicans' perceptions of themselves and their country. Filmic representations of these key historical periods are examined through three largely experimental films: Paul Leduc's *Reed: México insurgente* (1971), an episodic, revisionist account of the Mexican Revolution; Jorge Fons's *Rojo amanecer* (1989), which is centred around the Tlatelolco massacre; and Nicolás Echevarría's *Cabeza de Vaca* (1990), a kaleidoscopic view of the Conquest.

Chapter Three considers the changing depictions of the family in Mexican cinema. After the 1960s, the increasing liberation of women and changes in social mores led to the questioning of gender roles and the long-established model of the paternalistic nuclear

family. During the 1940s and 1950s, Mexican films had strongly supported the traditional family structure, particularly through the portrayal of mothers who were almost masochistic in their self-denial. This myth of motherhood is shattered in Luis Alcoriza's deeply satirical *Mecánica nacional* (1971), while an alternative family structured around a gay union is portrayed in Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* (1984). Arturo Ripstein's *Profundo Carmesí* (1996) focuses on an unbalanced couple whose attempt to create a pseudo-family based on the pretence that they are brother and sister leads to tragedy. Chapter Four concerns the often disregarded issue of Mexican attitudes towards the emigration of their people to the United States. A pre-1960s film, Alejandro Galindo's *Espaldas mojadas* (1953), is indicative of the strongly anti-emigration bias at this time and can be read as a warning against leaving one's country. Arturo Ripstein's *La ilegal* (1979) is a commercial film that follows along the same lines, although Ripstein's characteristic contrariness emerges in the fact that Mexicans, rather than North Americans, are the chief exploiters of emigrants. A completely different and more thoughtful approach to emigration is evident in María Novaro's *El jardín del Éden* (1994), a loosely woven narrative that deals with cross-cultural exchange in the border town of Tijuana.

Chicano cinema becomes the focus in Chapter Five, which introduces Chicano filmmaking with a discussion of the development of a distinct Chicano identity during the late 1960s and the difficulties involved in reconciling Mexican culture with life in the United States. Chapter Six chronicles the development of Chicano cinema, starting with a reading of George Stevens's *Giant* (1956), which suggests the negative stereotypes

Chicano directors sought to overturn. Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* (1954) is discussed as a model that Chicano filmmakers followed in its serious consideration of the difficulties faced by minority communities in the United States. The first Chicano feature, Jesus Treviño's *Raíces de sangre* (1977), marks a further stage of development in its convincing portrayal of aspects of Chicano culture such as code switching and the struggle against marginalisation. Chapter Seven considers the diverse reactions to the border in North American and Mexican-American thought, highlighting such areas of concern as the cultural insecurity of deracinated Mexicans and the harsh treatment they endure in a country where one must assimilate or be excluded from the majority. Gregory Nava's *El norte* (1983) provides a vivid account of the desperation that leads a Guatemalan brother and sister to attempt to build new lives in the United States. Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* (1987) is a story of reverse emigration, as a U.S. citizen of Mexican lineage is forced to re-evaluate his rather dismissive attitude towards Mexican culture after he is mistakenly deported. The degradation and corruption brought about by North American influence in a Mexican border town are portrayed in Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1995). Chapter Eight returns to the theme of the family. Luis Valdez's *La Bamba* (1987) centres on the difficulties faced by members of an impoverished one-parent family. Gregory Nava's *My Family* is a rather conventional, multigenerational portrait of a Chicano family. Ramón Menéndez's *Stand and Deliver* (1987) and Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992) offer visions of two family-like groups, the former a nurturing environment that fosters learning and advancement, the latter a nihilistic gang. By way of conclusion, the achievements of Mexican and Chicano cinema are considered, and the future of filmmaking in each community is explored.

The Dream Factory: The Growth of Mexican Cinema

For many Europeans and North Americans, Mexican cinema is synonymous with Alfonso Arau's 1991 *Como agua para chocolate*. Adapted by Laura Esquivel from her best-selling novel of the same name, the film enjoyed remarkable success both in Mexico and elsewhere, most notably in the United States. As Beatriz Badikian observes in her analysis of the film's popularity with North American audiences, until the release of the Italian film *Il Postino*, *Como agua para chocolate* was the highest-grossing foreign film ever in the United States.¹ In only ten months, from its U.S. release on February 17, 1993, the film grossed over \$19 million.² The popularity of a subtitled film made for only \$1 million and filmed in extremely difficult conditions with constant budgetary problems on a harsh desert location was unprecedented.³ More extraordinary still was the fact that this success rested in large part on the screening of the film not in art house cinemas but in theatres located in suburban malls, where audiences would not normally watch foreign, subtitled films.⁴ A brief overview of the film's plot suggests some reasons for its outstanding success.

¹ Beatriz Badikian, 'Food and Sex, That's All We're Good for: Images of Women in *Like Water for Chocolate*,' *Film & History*, (Vol. 28, No.1-2, 1998), p. 48.

² Tomas Perez Turrent, 'Entre agua y chocolate,' *Dicine*, (No.55, May 1994), p. 8.

³ For an account of the filming of *Como agua para chocolate*, see Brendan Galvin, 'Mexican Magic,' *Film Ireland*, (Issue 38, December 1993—January 1994), pp. 24-26.

⁴ Beatriz Badikian, 1998, p. 46.

Like the book on which it is based, the film unfolds around recipes from the kitchen of the De la Garza family, who live on the Mexican-American border. A multigenerational saga, the narrative charts the period from 1885 to 1934. The matriarch of the family, a domineering widow called Mama Élena, forbids her daughter Tita to marry her beloved Pedro Muizquiz in accordance with a family tradition that decrees that the youngest daughter must care for her mother. Pedro decides to marry Tita's sister Rosaura instead in order to be near his true love, but Élena realises the danger in this situation and the young couple soon move away. The other sister, Gertrudis, is a rebel who is swept away by Revolutionary soldiers and becomes a general herself. The servants in the household play important roles — the ancient Nacha is a mother figure to Tita and teaches her the culinary arts in which she excels, while Nacha's assistant Chenchá is a comic figure who provides light relief. The men in the film remain shadowy figures. Pedro rarely appears in the film after the narrative disruption arising from his frustrated love for Tita is established. The only other male character worth noting is Dr. John Brown, a North American doctor who befriends Tita and wants to marry her. He, like Pedro, is more important symbolically than as a character in his own right, for he represents a positive American presence in the film.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the film is that despite its setting in the key historical period before and after the Revolution, it rarely attempts to be realistic. From the outset, when Tita is born on the kitchen table amid a torrent of water

that yields 20 kilos of salt later used in cooking,⁵ *Como agua para chocolate* establishes a magical correspondence between cooking and emotion. Tita's fate is decided by her birth, not only because of the family tradition that rules her destiny but because she is born in the kitchen, where she remains for most of her life preparing dishes that have an extraordinary effect on those who eat them. The film's final scene, in which Tita and Pedro at last consummate their relationship, is an utterly fantastic one that sees Pedro die overwhelmed by passion. Other elements of the film worth noting are its visual beauty, achieved through the use of atmospheric lighting and a convincing *mise en scène*, and its earthy humour.

Como agua para chocolate's widespread popularity and commercial success can be explained in terms of its many positive elements. It has as its focus the universal tale of star-crossed lovers. The emphasis on culinary delights reinforces foreign perceptions of Mexico as an exotic land with wonderful native dishes. It is generally light-hearted and escapist in tone, while having great visual and sensual appeal. Finally, its conclusion, with the uniting of the lovers, is uplifting if rather bombastic. The exceptional fascination with the film across cultures and borders perhaps inevitably gave rise to dissenting voices. Critics of the film have tended to take exception to two key issues: the presentation of women in the narrative and the centrality of food to the film's popularity. Writing in *Sight & Sound*, John Kraniauskas is critical of the film's representation of what he

⁵ Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La eficacia del cine mexicano: Entre lo viejo y lo nuevo*, (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1994), p. 328.

interprets as “domestic servitude.”⁶ Badikian similarly finds the popularity of the film troubling and hints at latent racism in the North American middle-class viewer’s delight in the film’s depiction of food and sex: “. . . this representation of the female Mexican characters fulfills the stereotypes and expectations carried into the theatre by the viewers.”⁷ The stereotypes that concern both Kraniauskas and Badikian are those of Mexican women as either objects of desire or domestic servants, the latter being by far the most familiar image of Mexican women in the United States. More troubling still to Badikian is the figure of John Brown, the doctor whose support of Tita restores her mental and physical health and whose wisdom suggests the importance of U.S. knowledge and intervention in Mexico:

Selfless and generous, the American doctor is the perfect mirror for the American audiences who are thus sutured into his perspective. The First World spectators can identify with him and believe themselves the saviours, once again, of these primitive and unrefined Third World women.⁸

The presentation of Brown is certainly indicative of a pro-U.S. bias in the film that may have been calculated to appeal to U.S. audiences and that follows a long tradition of filmmaking in which foreign, usually North American, intervention in Latin America is portrayed as entirely positive and even necessary. Rather more ambiguity is involved in the presentation of women in *Como agua para chocolate* than Kraniauskas and Badikian allow for, nevertheless. Certainly, in the eyes of

⁶ Beatriz Badikian, 1998, p. 47.

⁷ Beatriz Badikian, 1998, p. 47.

⁸ Beatriz Badikian, 1998, p. 47.

U.S. audiences, the very representation of women engaged in domestic work would appear to suggest a somewhat oppressive society. On the other hand, such a narrow focus on this particular aspect of the lives of the women in the film overlooks the considerable power they wield. Élena is a tyrannical matriarch whose authority is never questioned by the men in the film and who rules her household with a severity that recalls the formidable Spanish matriarchs epitomised by Federico García Lorca's *Bernarda Alba*. Even Tita, despite her apparent inability to rule her destiny, manages to manipulate those around her by communicating her emotions through the food they eat. Gertrudis is the most openly rebellious character in the film, and it comes as no surprise that she uses her sexuality to become a general in the Revolutionary army. One of the film's most unconventional presentations of sexuality and authority occurs when Gertrudis is addressed in an extremely servile manner by a male soldier, who clearly sees her as his superior and as having a power that would normally be assigned to a man. This exchange underlines the role reversal in the film, where men throughout are either marginal figures or utterly powerless, in contrast to the deceptively submissive female characters.

If foreign commentators have deep reservations about the film's ideological stance towards women, Mexican critics have concentrated more on the centrality afforded to the culinary arts. Emilio García Riera takes issue with the film's profusion of styles and its exaltation of food:

Una novela de Laura Esquivel adaptada por ella misma permitió a su marido director mezclar en dosis convenientes imágenes rancheras (todo empieza en una hacienda de principios de siglo), otras revolucionarias, algo de realismo mágico (digamos) y, sobre todo, un fuerte erotismo identificado con la exaltación culinaria, tema central de esa cinta más hábil que inspirada.⁹

García Riera tempers his reservations about the film by praising its effective *mise en scène* and skilful cinematography, but fellow Mexican critic Jorge Ayala Blanco does not hold back. In an uncompromising attack on the film, he condemns its focus on the kitchen as “el universo en sí”¹⁰ and also mocks its use of diverse genres.

These comments reveal an extraordinarily dismissive attitude to the power of food as a cultural repository. Mexico’s gastronomic richness is a mainstay of its identity, as each region has its specific delicacies and ways of preparing food, which contribute to the community pride of those who enjoy them. The following account by Italo Calvino emphasises the diversity and complexity of Mexican cuisine:

On the supper menu we didn’t find *chiles en nogada*. From one locality to the next the gastronomic lexicon varied, always offering new terms to be recorded and new sensations to be defined. Instead, we found *guacamole*, to be scooped up with crisp tortillas that snap into many shards and dip like spoons into the thick cream (the fat softness of the

⁹ Emilio García Riera, *Breve historia del cine mexicano: Primer siglo 1897—1997*, (Mexico City: Ediciones Mapa, 1998), p. 370.

¹⁰ Jorge Ayala Blanco, 1994, p. 328.

aguacate—the Mexican national fruit, known to the rest of the world under the distorted name of “avocado”—is accompanied and underlined by the angular dryness of the tortilla, which, for its part, can have many flavors, pretending to have none); then *guajolote con mole poblano*—that is, turkey with Puebla-style *mole* sauce, one of the noblest among the many *moles*, and the most laborious.¹¹

As well as vividly conveying the astounding variety of Mexican cuisine, Calvino points to the links between food and language, a connection also noted by Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Guiu:

Involuntary memory in *Like Water for Chocolate* — modeled after Proust’s *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, where the smell of the madeleines triggers in the narrator a strand of remembrances past lived as a boy — is brought about in the process of cooking and the visceral relationship the narrator has to gastronomy.¹²

The power of food to revive distant memories with great immediacy is notable from the opening scene of *Como agua para chocolate*, when Tita’s great-niece prepares food using the recipes handed down to her. Food continues to introduce pivotal events in the story of the family that follows, becoming a marker of time and history that is the key to understanding many aspects of life in contemporary Mexico. A final notable and unconventional aspect of the presentation of food in the narrative is its ideological weight. It is no coincidence that a film that celebrates food in such an exuberant manner is set around the Mexican

¹¹ Italo Calvino, *Under the Jaguar Sun*, (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 8.

¹² Victor Zamudio-Taylor and Inma Guiu, ‘Criss-Crossing Texts: Reading Images in *Like Water for Chocolate*,’ Chon A. Noriega and Steven Ricci, eds., *The Mexican Cinema Project*, (California: UCLA Film and Television Archive, 1994), p. 47.

Revolution. This era brought a new Mexico into being, not least in terms of its cuisine, as old Indian foods returned to favour. The result was a culinary hybrid that has evolved into one of the world's high cuisines.

Como agua para chocolate is a deceptively simple film that has a far less conventional perspective than may at first appear. In terms of this study, it has a further significance in that it constitutes a veritable history of Mexican filmic tradition. Its humour and location on a ranch recall the *comedia ranchera* genre that defined the so-called golden age of Mexican cinema. The references to the Revolution evoke the films that chronicled this pivotal event, while the experiences of Gertrudis, who spends some time in a brothel before becoming a soldier, refer to the *cabaretera* style of filmmaking. The film also reflects on the themes of history, the family and the border, which will be considered in this study. Above all, it conveys the sensual appeal of food, which has a strong visual element that is paralleled in the lure of the cinematic image.

The centrality of cinema to everyday life in Mexico is underlined by the narrative that unfolds in José Emilio Pacheco's *Las batallas en el desierto*. This novella ostensibly recounts the adolescent love of a young boy for his friend's mother, but it also chronicles profound changes in Mexican society as the rather provincial Mexico City of the 1940s becomes the megalopolis of today. Throughout these metamorphoses, cinema remains a vital force that conveys enthralling narratives

seen by the narrator “mil veces,”¹³ while the newsreels that precede them bring the war in Europe to a distant land. The powerful attraction of cinema is most effectively portrayed through the novella’s description of the relationship between the narrator’s sister and a former child movie star:

También hubo líos a principios de año cuando Isabel se hizo novia de Esteban. En los treinta había sido famoso como actor infantil. Al crecer perdió su vocecita y su cara de inocencia. Ya no le dieron papeles en cine ni en teatro: Esteban se ganaba la vida leyendo chistes en la XEW, bebía como loco, estaba empeñado en casarse con Isabel e ir a probar suerte en Hollywood aunque no sabía una palabra de inglés. Llegaba a verla borracho, sin corbata, oliendo a rayos, con el traje manchado y los zapatos sucios. Nadie se lo explicaba. Pero Isabel era aficionada fanática. Esteban le parecía maravilloso porque Isabel lo vio en su época de oro y, a falta de Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Robert Mitchum o Cary Grant, Esteban representaba su única posibilidad de besar a un artista de cine.¹⁴

Both Isabel and Esteban appear more interested in Esteban’s screen image than his real existence as a failed actor. His dogged insistence on the possibility that he could succeed in Hollywood, a dream exposed by the detail that he cannot speak English, and Isabel’s willingness to overlook his desperate present condition so that she can live the fantasy of kissing a film star suggest the powerful hold that cinema has on their imaginations. Pacheco’s wry evocation of a couple divorced from reality and obsessed with the cinema is, like many other incidents in the book, also a parody of Mexican society of the time. The inability

¹³ José Emilio Pacheco, *Las batallas en el desierto*, (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1999), p. 20.

¹⁴ José Emilio Pacheco, 1999, p. 53.

to distinguish between reality and image was a hallmark of early Mexican cinema audiences and characterised many of the great successes of the Mexican film industry. This is particularly true of the popularity of the fantastic *comedia ranchera* genre, which reached its apex in the 1930s and 1940s.

The history of film in Mexico has at times seemed as improbable as some of the more far-fetched plots of its films. From its inception, the cinema has chronicled real-life events, such as the Mexican Revolution, in a romanticised manner while making romantic scenarios seem real. It has benefited from such unlikely events as World War II and even managed, in the 1930s and 1940s, to create a star system and filmic genres to rival the popularity of Hollywood films.¹⁵ It has not been without its problems, however, among them a lack of both resources and inventiveness, as well as the spectre of repressive state intervention, which has led to the censorship of countless films.

The first cinema opened in Mexico City on August 16, 1896, only a few months after the first cinematic presentation by the Lumière brothers in Paris. Some weeks later, representatives of the Lumière company showed the first images filmed in Mexico to President Porfirio Díaz.¹⁶ The introduction of cinema so soon to Mexico is not as surprising as it may appear. As Carl J. Mora points out, “Mexico was prosperous, politically stable, and a member in good standing of

¹⁵ For a history of the growth of Mexico’s film studios, see Tomas Perez Turrent, ed., *La fábrica de los sueños: Estudios Churubusco 1945—1985*, Mexico City: IMCINE, 1985)

¹⁶ Jorge Alberto Lozoya,, ‘Re-vision del cine mexicano,’ *Artes de México*, (No.10, winter 1990), p. v.

progressive European civilization”¹⁷ and was therefore a good choice for screening the first films, which were received as enthusiastically as they had been in Europe. García Riera observes that these events did not mark the beginning of cinema in Mexico, however, as the Kinetophone, the invention of Thomas Alva Edison and W.K.L. Dickson, had arrived in January 1895. This apparatus only allowed one person to view images at a time, so Lumière’s innovation represented an important step forward because it made cinema a theatrical presentation.¹⁸

Mexico was distinguished by being the only Latin American country in which representatives of the Lumière company made films. The first of these, *El presidente Porfirio Díaz montando a caballo por el bosque de Chapultepec*, directed by Fernando Bon Bernard and Gabriel Veyre, was a huge hit, not least with Díaz, who subsequently granted the directors permission to make some 26 films in 1896.¹⁹ This film initiated a popular genre, the depiction of famous people going about their everyday business or engaged in important duties. From 1900 to 1906, cinema was an itinerant industry, with exhibitors of films touring the nation.

Films had become so popular by 1907 that Mexico City boasted 37 movie theatres.²⁰ The early documentaries produced in Mexico received an

¹⁷ Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896—1980*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 5.

¹⁸ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 18.

¹⁹ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 20.

²⁰ Aurelio de los Reyes, ‘The Silent Cinema,’ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, *Mexican Cinema*: (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 64-66.

unprecedented boost when the Revolution broke out in 1910, providing an extremely dramatic, complex national event to portray. An unexpected consequence of the Revolution was the interest of Hollywood. On January 3, 1914, Pancho Villa signed an exclusive contract for \$25,000 with the Mutual Film Corporation that involved some remarkable conditions:

Se acordó que Villa llevaría a cabo sus batallas a la luz del día y que no permitiría la presencia de otras firmas cinematográficas en el campo de guerra. Villa escenificaría batallas siempre y cuando no se hubieran podido filmar las verdaderas. Incluso aceptó ponerse un uniforme militar que había sido diseñado por la empresa sólo para que saliera a escena (no podía usarlo en otras ocasiones.)²¹

Villa also agreed to reschedule firing-squad executions from 4 a.m. until after dawn to suit the filmmakers.²² Not surprisingly, given the degree of artifice involved in the filming, the end result, Christy Cabanne's *La vida del General Villa* (1914), was a fictional account of the Revolution and Villa's career. The film ended with Villa being pronounced president of Mexico, a scenario that reflected the wishes of North Americans at the time, who thought Villa a suitable leader of the country, although this opinion was to change radically later.²³ It opened to much acclaim in the Lyric Theatre in New York on May 9, 1914. This extraordinary collaboration was a reflection of a move away from a purely European influence on Mexican cinema, as North America began to take an

²¹ Margarita de Orellana, 'Pancho Villa: Primer actor del cine de la Revolución,' *Artes de México*, (No.10. winter 1990), p. 59.

²² Duncan Green, *Faces of Latin America*, (London: Latin American Bureau, 1997), p. 100.

²³ Margarita de Orellana, *Artes de México*, (No.10, winter 1990), p. 59.

interest in its southern neighbour's fledgling industry. It is also an important evocation of the way in which U.S. cinema has traditionally had little regard for the realities of foreign wars, focusing instead on charismatic characters and flamboyant details, such as an inauthentic uniform designed to suit the dramatic ideas of the filmmakers. Villa's acceptance of the deal is understandable. He was a pragmatist who needed money to finance his troops and who could never have foreseen that the film would make him a star abroad. For Hollywood cinematographers, it was the first of many excursions to the south that portrayed Mexicans in a picaresque manner.

The Revolution was equally important to the Mexican film industry. By 1911, the government had started to take an active interest in the new medium. President Francisco I. Madero's representatives appointed inspectors to oversee the hygiene and morality of cinema theatres, with rather comic results, as García Riera records:

En lo primero, se advertía una proliferación de pulgas favorecida por la oscuridad y por los espectadores poco aseados; en lo segundo, se reprobaba que los espectadores aplaudieran las escenas de robo, por ejemplo.²⁴

Despite the less than salubrious conditions of cinemas, the public flocked to see Mexican documentaries of the Revolution. Aurelio de los Reyes comments that these documentaries initially tried to show both sides of the Revolution and

²⁴ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 29.

limited themselves to presenting events without providing any subjective commentary.²⁵ Mexican productions about the Revolution could not compete with those made by U.S. filmmakers, as they had a fraction of their budgets and did not have the prospect of widespread international distribution. Nonetheless, they were extremely successful at home, because, as García Riera points out, cinema had shifted from being a diverting entertainment to a medium capable of disseminating complex events in a tumultuous era:

Los documentales mexicanos, realizados con menores recursos que los norteamericanos, no tuvieron en el extranjero una difusión comparable con la de los foráneos. Sin embargo, el público del país los acogió con un interés excepcional: buscaba en ellos, parece, no tanto la ilustración de algo sabido como la noticia misma, la información capaz de dar sentido a un cúmulo de comunicaciones imprecisas, contradictorias e insuficientes.²⁶

The Revolution became the clearest example of the centrality of cinema to the shaping of Mexican culture and opinion, especially among the lower classes. The cinema gave people who had never travelled outside their remote villages, nor aspired to anything more than a life identical to that of their parents, an insight into other worlds and other possibilities. Documentaries of the Revolution allowed people to interpret events that they could never have witnessed in such an immediate manner. The cinema also democratised the notion of culture, for it was enjoyed equally by viewers of different classes and reflected Mexican

²⁵ Aurelio de los Reyes, 1995, p. 69.

²⁶ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 24.

experience in a way that was impossible before. This new equality was not welcomed by the oligarchy, however:

La democratización bárbara sorprendió a la élite, sacudió sus pretensiones de considerar la cultura del exterior como un coto cerrado disfrutable únicamente por mentes educadas. ¿Cómo podían las almas groseras acceder al mundo de ilusiones que prometía el cinematógrafo? ¿Cómo podían ellos, los esclavizados por la faena diaria, los adictos al entretenimiento soez de la carpa alburera, acceder a la estratosfera del buen gusto?²⁷

The concerns of the elite about the presumption of the lower classes in thinking that they could appreciate the images presented by the cinema overlooks the key fact that the early Revolutionary documentaries illustrated — the Mexican public was a willing student. By far the most important function of early cinema was to teach people how to look and to introduce them to new worlds. Mexicans were only too eager to embrace this new medium and to begin to appreciate a new way of seeing life, as Carlos Monsiváis confirms:

En esos primeros años (que se prolongan hasta la década del cuarenta) el público mexicano y el latinoamericano no resintieron al cine como fenómeno específico, artístico o industrial. La razón generativa del éxito fue estructural, vital; en el cine, este público vio la posibilidad de experimentar, de adoptar nuevos hábitos y de ver reiterados (y dramatizados, con las voces que le gustaría tener y oír) códigos de costumbres. No se acudió al cine a soñar: se fue a aprender.²⁸

²⁷ Carlos Bonfil, 'De la época de oro a la edad de la tentación,' Carlos Monsiváis, *A través del espejo: El cine mexicano y su público*, (Mexico City: Ediciones el Milagro, 1994), p. 11.

²⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, 'Manipulación y montaje,' *Historia general de México*, (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1998), p. 1518.

The complicity of the viewers with the filmmakers meant that the transition from documentaries to fictional films went smoothly. The subject of the Revolution continued to fascinate directors well into the 1930s, when Fernando de Fuentes made his famous trilogy *El prisionero 13* (1933), *El compadre Mendoza* (1933) and *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1935). By 1916, Revolutionary documentaries had fallen from favour, however, and audiences were ready for something new.²⁹

Enrique Rosas's *El automóvil gris* (1919) was a key film of the era and its most fully realised fictional production. The film follows the adventures of a group of house breakers who dressed in the uniforms worn by Venustiano Carranza's men. It was strongly influenced by Italian melodramas, which were immensely popular with Mexican audiences, and represents a milestone in its use of a quasi-documentary style to tell a fictional story.³⁰ The triumph it represented for Mexican filmmaking was short-lived, however, as Hollywood films began to dominate in the early 1920s. The overwhelming presence of Hollywood almost destroyed the Mexican film industry. Only two films were made in 1923, the following year saw no film production at all, and in 1930, of the 244 films screened in the capital, only four were Mexican.³¹ An astounding paradox undermined the influence of Hollywood somewhat, however, and allowed the Mexican film industry to find its feet once more. The success of the first sound

²⁹ Aurelio de los Reyes, 1995, p. 71.

³⁰ Aurelio de los Reyes, 1995, p. 72-75.

³¹ Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967—1983*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. 13.

films, such as Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and fierce domestic competition led the studios to believe that they could increase their market share in Latin America by producing films in Spanish.³² This idea could not have been more mistaken. Mexican audiences resented the replacement of their favourite stars by unknowns who spoke a curious hybrid Spanish intended to appeal to all Spanish speakers. In addition, the poorer production values and bland narratives of the so-called Hispanic films did not appeal to viewers. These problems led to the rapid decline of these films, so that by 1932 only about six of them were produced.³³

This rejection of inferior Spanish-language Hollywood films by local audiences gave Mexican filmmakers a long-awaited opportunity to win their viewers back. Sound films in authentic Mexican Spanish were a great success with audiences, not least because dubbing had not been developed and reading subtitles was considered a nuisance or, for illiterate viewers, impossible. A few minor films were produced using indirect sound supplied by record players and other devices, but the first film to use synchronised sound was Antonio Moreno's 1931 *Santa*. An unabashed melodrama, *Santa* follows the adventures of a young country girl who is raped and turns to prostitution. She meets her true love in a bullfighter, but their union is doomed and the film ends tragically. Although hardly a masterpiece, the film was a huge success. Its popularity was significant for a

³² Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, 'Origins, Development and Crisis of the Sound Cinema (1929—1964),' Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 79.

³³ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 77.

number of reasons. Chief among them was the fact that it proved that there was a audience for films that centred on the experiences of Mexicans, with the result that it paved the way for many more accomplished films made later. It also established a taste for sensational dramas, often based on the suffering of virtuous women characters. Its use of music by Agustín Lara was similarly important, as afterwards music was a key ingredient in the success of Mexican features.³⁴ On the level of production, *Santa* was at least partly responsible for the state's initial support of the film industry, which began when the government gave a guaranteed loan to finance the establishment of the first modern film studio in Mexico City in 1934.³⁵ Perhaps the most enduringly popular and influential film of Mexico's golden age, Fernando de Fuentes's 1936 *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, could not have been made without the success of *Santa*.

This seminal film, which gave rise to the so-called golden age era and transformed Mexican film practice, blends some of the melodramatic aspects of *Santa* with the evocation of a rural paradise and a strong nationalistic flavour. *Allá en el Rancho Grande* also adapted Hollywood formulas, such as the singing cowboy films popularised by Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, to Mexican tastes.³⁶ As Ramírez Berg observes, de Fuentes's film established the Mexican genre known as the *comedia ranchera* and prescribed many of its conventions: “. . . generously interspersed musical numbers punctuating a romantic story —

³⁴ Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, pp. 80-81.

³⁵ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 14.

³⁶ See Carlos Monsiváis in John King, *Mediating Two Worlds*, (London: British Film Institute, 1993), p.141 and Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 98.

typically a boy-meets-girl, gets-girl story or a tale of rivals (best friends, brothers, cousins) vying for the favor of a beautiful girl.”³⁷ Writing in *Hojas de cine*, García Riera points out that these films were not as divorced from reality as they may appear, however.³⁸ They deliberately and pointedly ignore Lázaro Cárdenas’s post-Revolution agrarian reform, which attempted to transfer land from ranch owners. The fact that Mexico was at the vanguard politically because of its expropriation of oil holdings and support for the Spanish Republic was also overlooked in favour of presenting a fantasy land where the most important crises centred on love affairs accompanied by folkloric music.

Allá en el Rancho Grande revolves around a romantic conflict between Felipe, who has inherited the Rancho Grande from his father, and José Franciso, played by Tito Guizar, Felipe’s best friend from childhood and the foreman of his ranch. Both men are in love with the beautiful Cruz, played by Esther Fernández, who is engaged to José Francisco. Cruz’s godmother conspires to bring Cruz to Felipe in exchange for money, but the asthmatic girl faints and her virtue remains intact. José Francisco learns of the meeting and plans to kill Felipe, but the latter convinces him that nothing happened between himself and Cruz. Harmony is restored when Cruz and José Francisco marry at the film’s conclusion.

³⁷ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 98.

³⁸ Emilio García Riera, ‘Cuando el cine mexicano se hizo industria,’ *Hojas de cine*, (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1988), p. 11.

Allá en el Rancho Grande is characterised above all by its glorification of rural life. Its nostalgic tone is suggested by the song that gives the film its name, which is sung from the point of view of a person looking back on the idyllic life he enjoyed on the ranch. The film's sentimental quality is further underscored by the many musical interludes, which both appeal to female viewers in their presentation of tender yet masculine male characters and form a sense of group cohesiveness in their use of well-known traditional songs familiar to the audience. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the *mise en scène* is the extremely close-knit community at the heart of the Rancho Grande. To view the film as a microcosm of an ideal Mexico takes no great leap of the imagination. At the time it was made, most Mexicans lived in rural communities and mass migration to Mexico City had not become a widespread phenomenon. The ranch owners may be identified as benevolent dictators, echoing the nostalgic view of the deposed Porfirio Díaz still held by many Mexicans in the wake of the Revolution. The film's reactionary message is well articulated by Monsiváis:

Contra la Reforma Agraria cardenista se promulga una utopía azucarada. ¿Su repertorio? Un Edén aún intacto, la figura simpática y humana del hacendado, el gracioso servilismo de los peones, la ronda incansable de palenques y guitarras. La hacienda porfirista como eterno Rancho Grande. De entre las fantasías clasistas que ha urdido el cine mexicano, la comedia ranchera es la más ortodoxa, la visualización del sueño de los patrones, siempre a contracorriente ya no de la realidad campesina. . .³⁹

³⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, *Historia general de México*, 1998, p. 1515.

Overall, the film presents a resoundingly positive picture of a Mexico where men are macho but caring, and where a strong sense of community protects the weak. The benevolent ranch owner can be counted on to fulfil the needs of those who serve him, provided that they remain in their proper place. The film's success undoubtedly had less to do with its conservative political stance than with its folkloric elements, however, which, as García Riera notes, were ripe for commercial exploitation:

...habría que esperar el enorme éxito de *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) para que se entendiera lo que después pudo parecer obvio: sería la explotación del folclor mexicano, del color local y, sobre todo, de las canciones, lo que daría al cine mexicano su solvencia comercial en todo el continente americano.⁴⁰

As the above comment suggests, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* transformed the Mexican film industry and delighted audiences both in Mexico and throughout Latin America, as well as in the Spanish-speaking regions of the United States.⁴¹

Its success revitalised film production in Mexico, moreover. In 1936, 24 Mexican films were made, a number that increased to 38 a year later and to 58 in 1938.⁴²

The *comedia ranchera* genre was virtually exhausted as early as 1939 because of market saturation with films that presented an idealised depiction of old plantation life. Nonetheless, De Fuentes's film remained a watershed that pointed to new possibilities in the presentation of the nation and its culture.

⁴⁰ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 81.

⁴¹ Emilio García Riera, 'The Impact of Rancho Grande,' Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 128.

⁴² Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 102.

The golden age era has undergone a major critical reassessment in recent times. Indeed, as Dolores Tierney points out, its name derives from the dual character of the films produced within its rubric:

The name 'Golden' clearly refers to this cinema's gilded, idealized representations of Mexican life. Yet the Golden Age was also a period when, despite the use of Hollywood structures of production and its stylistic and narrative technique, Mexican filmmakers were able to forge what is perceived as a distinctly national cinema.⁴³

Despite the obvious limitations of genre films such as the *comedia ranchera*, they led to a renewed confidence in native talent, to the extent that in 1939, President Cárdenas decreed that every cinema should screen at least one Mexican film each month.⁴⁴ Critics disagree about the length of time that can be considered Mexican cinema's golden age. Gustavo García argues that it lasted from 1933 to 1964,⁴⁵ while Emilio García Riera restricts it to the period from 1941 to 1945.⁴⁶ Most critics agree that it spanned the 20-year era from 1935 to 1955, however.⁴⁷ The films produced over these two decades both reflected life in Mexico, albeit with an emphasis on the positive aspects of society, and profoundly shaped it. One of the most enduring genres to emerge at this time was the melodrama. It normally centred on the family, as in the case of Juan Bustillo Oro's 1941 *Cuando los hijos*

⁴³ Dolores Tierney 'Silver sling-backs and Mexican Melodrama: *Salón México* and *Danzón*,' *Screen*, (Vol.38, No. 4, winter 1997), p. 360.

⁴⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, *Historia general de México*, 1998, p. 1520.

⁴⁵ Gustavo García, 'Melodrama: The Passion Machine,' Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 158.

⁴⁶ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Carlos Monsiváis, 'Mexican Cinema: Of Myths and Demystifications,' John King, 1993, p. 142.

se van. This drama reasserts the importance of the preservation of the family, capitalism and patriarchy. The Revolution remained a popular theme, and many films were set in distinctly Mexican locales such as the cabaret, the dance hall, the cantina and the boxing ring. The very banality of these stories and their settings proved to be the key to their popularity, as Monsiváis argues:

The so-called Golden Age, between 1935 and 1955 more or less, was in reality the period of an alliance between the film industry and the audiences of the faithful, between the films and the communities that saw themselves represented there. During those years, in many parts of Latin America, those communities watched those films and saw themselves in them, distinct and recognisable. What today is described as an exasperating naivety in the majority of these films had more to do with the technical ineptitude of directors and 'stars' in particular, and with the lack of any critical response on the part of the audience. For a long period they considered films to be neither art nor spectacle but rather the continuation of everyday life, the believable explanation of the meaning of their lives.⁴⁸

The overwhelming success of the films produced during the golden age certainly suggests that audiences were not keen to be challenged by polemical examinations of society and were happy to passively enjoy spectacles that confirmed the *mexicanidad* of their own lives. Monsiváis dismisses the star system in particular far too lightly, however. A crucial element in the attraction of golden age films was the creation of a local star system to rival Hollywood's. Carlos Bonfil points out that audience familiarity with certain actors not only

⁴⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, in John King, 1993, p. 142.

guaranteed the success of the films in which they appeared but led to expectations about the relationship between actor and role:

El público cuenta ya con un prototipo de comicidad urbana: Cantinflas el “peladito”; una primera pareja romántica: Tito Guízar y Esther Fernández; presencias tutelares que son barricadas contra el vicio y la desintegración familiar: Fernando Soler y Sara García; aprovisionamientos del rencor: Miguel Inclán y el Indio Bedoya; modelos de virilidad y simpatía campiranas: Jorge Negrete y Pedro Infante; un modelo de abnegación femenina: Blanca Estela Pavón, la “Chorreada”; una hembra gorgónica: María Félix, y la femineidad estilizada que es reverberación del cine mudo: Dolores del Río.⁴⁹

The film boom during this period owed a great debt to the aesthetic qualities of the works produced, particularly in their nationalistic appeal and in the availability of a diverse range of stars with whom audiences could identify. Economic factors also played a significant role. In 1942, the Banco Cinematográfico was established to provide loans that would foster the cinema industry.⁵⁰ An added boost came from Mexico’s chief cinematic rival, the United States. As World War II raged, the United States sought the support of as many allies as possible. One way in which Mexico’s cooperation was sought was through the auspices of Nelson Rockefeller’s Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs. Mexico, which supported the Allies, was granted loans, technical aid and precious film stock, the production of which was restricted because cellulose was needed for the manufacture of explosives. In contrast,

⁴⁹ Carlos Bonfil, ‘De la época de oro a la edad de la tentación,’ Carlos Monsiváis, 1994, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Jaime Tello, ‘Notas sobre la política económica del “viejo” cine mexicano,’ *Hojas de cine*, 1988, p. 23.

Argentina, which had previously outstripped Mexico in terms of film production, was denied film stock because of the country's pro-Nazi elements.⁵¹ This collaboration was the single most important factor in the development of a successful national film industry.

The end of the war also brought an end to the support of Mexico's film industry by its northern neighbour. Hollywood dominated local markets once more, and the amount of film stock allocated to Mexico sharply declined.⁵² What is more, the increasing sophistication of audiences, who had by now seen almost 20 years of North American, European and national productions, made the established genres seem lacking in novelty. The increasing urbanisation of Mexico meant that films glorifying rural life no longer reflected the experiences of a large proportion of the population. The films of the late 1940s and early 1950s reflected this crossroads. In 1948, Fernando de Fuentes remade his greatest hit, *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, which adhered closely to the formula that introduced the golden age. Only two years later, Luis Buñuel made the groundbreaking *Los olvidados*, which pointed to a new way of visualising Mexican life. The contrast between these films represents the tension between filmmakers who sought to prolong the golden age style and a new generation who began to make unromantic, gritty urban dramas.

⁵¹ Édgar Soberón Torchia, *Un siglo de cine*, (Mexico City: Cinememoria, 1995), p. 218.

⁵² Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 39.

The 1948 version of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* persists in the evocation of a rural paradise. In its opening sequence, the camera pans through pristine, deserted countryside, establishing a sense of an Edenic landscape. This scene dissolves, and the Rancho Grande is introduced as a horseman enters its arched gateway. The viewer follows him to a courtyard outside the ranch house and witnesses the jubilant celebration of the Saint's Day of the ranch's owner, Don Rosendo. The festivities are lively and genuine on the part of the ranch hands. Their representative Nicanor makes a moving speech paying tribute to Don Rosendo, who responds graciously. The distinctly Mexican nature of the setting is emphasised through the presence of Mariachi musicians, the depiction of traditional dancing and the food and drink that the guests enjoy. A melodramatic strain is introduced when a child from the nearby Rancho Chico, José Francisco, summons his godmother Angela to tell her that his mother Marcelina is dying. Angela immediately appeals to Don Rosendo for help. Without hesitation, he organises transport to the other ranch and gives Angela money to organise the burial of the dying woman. He dismisses Angela's effusive thanks, turning instead to the boy, whom he counsels wisely and bids to come to him for whatever he may need. When the pair depart, Don Rosendo turns to his own young son, Felipe, who has witnessed the conversation with José Francisco, saying: "Con esto ve aprendiendo, Felipe, como el dueño de un rancho tiene que ser para sus pobres peones padre, médico, juez y a veces hasta enterrador." Angela summons her drunken husband, Florencio, and they leave with José Francisco.

An intensely emotional scene follows around Marcelina's death bed. The dying woman entrusts her children to Angela and begs her to also take care of Cruz, an orphaned girl that she had taken in after the death of her mother. Angela grudgingly agrees to this latter request, and Florencio is embarrassed into promising Marcelina that he will never drink again. The next scene sees Angela dressing the children in preparation for a visit to Don Rosendo. Cruz is not included, for Angela says that Don Rosendo wanted to meet her godchildren and "esta no es nada mía." A light-hearted exchange follows as Angela and the children meet Florencio, who is extremely drunk. Angela rebukes him severely, reminding him of his promise to Marcelina:

Angela: ¿No le jurastes a mi difunta comadre no volver a tomar?

Florencio: Sí, viejita, yo le juré que no volvería a tomar, pero no le dije qué cosa.

Angela: Pues ella se refería al vino.

Florencio: Pues yo me refería al agua.

While Florencio enters the house, the children meet Don Rosendo, who tells Felipe that he and José Francisco will be friends and attend the ranch's school together. Angela is told that she will receive a double portion of maize from now on. The boys play in Don Rosendo's office at being ranch owner and ranch manager, a scene that dissolves into a real-life repetition of this action as Felipe, who has become the head of the ranch after his father's death, makes José

Francisco his foreman. Felipe then asks him to summon Martín, a ranch hand, so that they can accompany him to the village of Real Mineros, where he wants to serenade his girlfriend on her Saint's Day. We learn hereafter that Martín wishes to court Cruz but that she is in love with José Francisco, who promises to marry her if he earns enough money by winning a horse race.

The men travel to Real Mineros to serenade Felipe's girlfriend and participate in a cock fight the following day. The brutality of the fight ostensibly at the centre of the scene is overshadowed by the entertainment that precedes it, which amounts to a showcase of Mexican song and dance. The eventual fight lasts only seconds, thus further distracting from its violence, as Don Perales from Real Mineros accuses Felipe of cheating by using a different cockerel from the one he had previously shown him. A fight ensues, and José Francisco saves Felipe's life by intercepting a bullet intended for him. Although gravely wounded, he survives and participates in the horse race that he hopes will enable him to marry Cruz.

Meanwhile, Eulalia, José Francisco's sister, has won the heart of the owner of the Rancho Chico, Don Labor, who is expected to come to the house to ask for her hand. Angela is overjoyed and wishes to throw a dance to receive Don Labor, but José Francisco is unable to lend her the 100 pesos she needs. Angela then turns to Felipe, who refuses to help. At this, Angela hatches the scheme that introduces the theme of the wronged woman. Angela gives Felipe the impression that Cruz is willing to sleep with him in exchange for the money. Despite his initial

protestations, Felipe conspires with Angela to bring Cruz to the ranch, having dismissed his guards so that no one will see her there. When he learns that Cruz is innocent and that she is in love with José Francisco, he is horrified and takes her home. The curious guards have suspected that something is afoot, however, and they see Cruz leave in Felipe's arms. The climax occurs when José Francisco returns triumphant and celebrates his win in the bar with the men, who have gossiped animatedly about the supposed liaison between Cruz and Felipe. When he announces his plan to marry Cruz, there is a stunned silence, and at length he learns the rumour about the supposed affair between Cruz and Felipe. He attempts to confront Cruz but is met by Eulalia, who tells him the truth. After a confrontation with Felipe in front of the entire community, José Francisco believes that Cruz is innocent. The crowd is appeased, Angela is disgraced and order is restored. The final scene further emphasises the return to harmony in a wedding procession from the chapel. The three young couples emerge, followed, to much amusement, by Angela and Florencio, who had never been married by the church.

Despite his relatively few appearances in the film, Don Rosendo remains its key authority figure. His lecture to his son on the responsibilities of a good ranch owner merits closer examination. He believes that he has the right to act as father, doctor, judge and even gravedigger to the ranch hands who work for him. The relationship between the ranch owner and his dependants relies on a harmonious state, wherein everyone knows his place and is satisfied with it

because of the kindness and fairness shown by the overlord. Don Rosendo's assertion of his right to control every aspect of his workers' lives can be read in positive terms as a reflection of his deep sense of responsibility for his charges. There is also an ominous note in the indication that he interferes in familial, medical and judicial matters. The only challenge to his power comes indirectly in the much later scene in which Felipe has a row with Don Perales from Real Mineros, who accuses him of switching the birds in a cock fight. Felipe responds indignantly saying "Yo no engaño a nadie" but Perales responds sarcastically, saying "No engaña, tenía que ser del Rancho Grande, puros capitalistas, explotadores de los pobres." There is at least some truth in this statement, given the extreme dependence of the workers, who rely on Don Rosendo even to allocate their food, as the case of Angela suggests. The challenge arouses such outrage in the onlookers and is put down so decisively that the authority of the ranch owner is firmly reinstated, however. Even 12 years after the making of the original film, which was deeply nostalgic, De Fuentes persists in upholding the rights of the ranch owners.

Undoubtedly the most dramatic element of the film remains that of Cruz's apparent disgrace and its subsequent resolution. Although Cruz's morality is never in doubt, it is significant that Angela, who attempts to prostitute her, is the only woman in the story to lack respectability. She has never been married to Florencio, but they live together as man and wife and she tells Don Rosendo that they have a daughter. Angela's intense desire to see Eulalia marry a rich

landowner may be partly a wish to live vicariously through her and thus remedy the faults in her own situation by assuming the respectable role of mother-in-law to a wealthy, powerful man. The limits of Angela's autonomy and the folly of her overarching social ambition are revealed in the resolution of the scandal over Cruz's supposed lack of chastity, however. The problem of the apparent liaison between Cruz and Felipe is ultimately solved not through a discussion with Cruz and Angela but through a confrontation between Felipe and José Francisco. Cruz's honour is not a private matter but one that reflects on the entire community and particularly on José Francisco, who could not marry a sexually experienced woman without losing the respect of his peers. It is the men, therefore, who concern themselves with the issue, for the women are subordinate to them and have little say in even a matter that concerns their own sexuality. The dominance of male authority, which is evident in the figures of Don Rosendo, Felipe and, on a different level, José Francisco, is underscored here in the figure of Florencio. Up to this point in the film, he was merely a figure of fun, but when the status quo in his home is challenged, he assumes his role as patriarch and it is he who delivers the punishment that Angela deserves.

The success of the second version of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* was in no small part due to the casting of Jorge Negrete in the lead role. His obvious masculinity means that although he is romantic and given to song, he is never less than macho. José Francisco's inherent nobility is recognised by Felipe's father, who considers him a suitable companion for his son, despite their difference in class.

José Francisco is defined above all by his *mexicanidad*. He is adept at Mexican music, he enjoys the traditional manly pursuits of racing and cock fighting, and he is not too puritanical to join the other men at the bar for a drink. His quick wit and natural air of authority make him an obvious choice for the romantic lead in the film, moreover. Felipe, despite his privileged upbringing, is a far less appealing character. He is less brave than his friend, who saves his life, and even employs him to serenade his girlfriend. His lack of character is exposed in his agreement to Angela's pact, although his excuse that he is a man and that all men behave in this way seems perfectly acceptable to the crowd when the climactic exchange in which Cruz's honour is restored takes place. Felipe's flaws serve to emphasise José Francisco's strengths and may suggest to the audience the appealing idea that true nobility is not related to class.

The film does suggest some aspects of society that could threaten the harmonious status quo. Florencio's drunkenness and irresponsibility would appear to be profoundly negative, but he is never censured by anyone except the shrewish Angela and is portrayed as a harmless, comic figure throughout. Despite his alcoholism, he is never abusive and remains capable of punishing Angela at the film's conclusion. Angela is undeniably the most problematic character in the film. Her quest for money could be considered a reflection of poverty and desperation in Mexico, which has led to the prostitution of many young girls. This interpretation is mitigated by her particular circumstances, however. Her

desire for money is motivated not by real need but by her eagerness to impress Don Labor. Angela's true sin then is to aspire to more than her natural station. Her willingness to stoop to any depths to better herself through the marriage of Eulalia, which must proceed smoothly even at the cost of Cruz's virtue, is the real cause of the social disruption that the narrative must solve.

The remake develops little from the original film. Standards of morality that verged on fantasy in the late 1930s are still promoted over a decade later, as are tight community bonds and allegiance to a rich landowner. As in the 1936 version, the greatest sin that one can commit is to aspire to a station above one's allocated position in society. Virtue is the most valuable treasure that a woman can possess, a fact that reflects on men also, as a true macho could not marry a supposedly impure woman. As Julianne Burton-Carvajal points out, the fact that Angela's situation is incompatible with the mores of the wider community (she is "not-mother, not-wife"⁵³) remains a serious problem. A final aspect of the film that endures unchanged is the relentless promotion of Mexican culture, particularly in lengthy musical interludes, and the reliance on popular culture to charm the audience. Despite the fact that it was made so soon after the second version of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, in 1950, Buñuel's *Los olvidados* could not mark a more profound shift from the successful *comedia ranchera* formula.

⁵³ Julianne Burton-Carvajal, 'Mexican Melodramas of Patriarchy,' Anne Marie Stock, ed., *Framing Latin American Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 211.

The peaceful rural community is replaced by a chaotic, lawless urban milieu in which relationships are based on self-interest and greed and family bonds mean little. Unlike the *comedia ranchera*, *Los olvidados* is populated by individuals who expect little from life and each other and certainly feel no obligation to anyone outside members of their immediate family, if even to them. The struggle involved in surviving from day to day takes precedence over any emotional dilemma, and the order exemplified in the hierarchical organisation of the ranch is entirely absent. There is a sense from the very first sequence, moreover, of destitute people overwhelmed by the savage city they inhabit. The opening shot presents a tableau of images of the majestic structures associated with major cities. The voiceover that accompanies these images is deceptively bland, for it points to the pessimistic conclusion of the film:

Las grandes ciudades modernas, Nueva York, París, Londres, esconden tras sus magníficos edificios, hogares de miseria, que albergan niños malnutridos, sin higiene, sin escuela, semillero de futuros delincuentes. La sociedad trata de corregir este mal, pero el éxito de sus esfuerzos es muy limitado. Sólo en un futuro próximo podrán ser reivindicados los derechos del niño y del adolescente para que sean útiles a la sociedad. México, la gran ciudad moderna, no es la excepción a esta regla universal; por eso esta película, basada en hechos de la vida real, no es optimista y deja la solución del problema a las fuerzas progresistas de la sociedad.

This voiceover is uncharacteristically straightforward and moralistic in the light of Buñuel's other work. In his first film, *Un chien andalou* (1928), the director parodied the use of such introductory devices by using a title saying "Once upon a

time” in the opening sequence, thus promising a temporal coherence that the film does not deliver. Despite its apparent incongruity in a film by Buñuel, the introductory voiceover fulfils an important task. From the outset, the audience is warned that the action is based in the seedy, overlooked parts of Mexico City and that it reflects real-life events. Although an urban model had been established in native cinema, it upheld the same values as the *comedia ranchera* genre had, according to Monsiváis: “El barrio (el quinto patio) sustituye a la provincia como refugio de los tiernos y sólidos valores de la convivencia que la ciudad, en su rencor y estrépito, mancilla.”⁵⁴ The introduction is vital, therefore, for audiences had grown accustomed to pleasant, unchallenging films that portrayed the most desirable aspects of Mexican life. Indeed, by 1950, the cinema industry in Mexico had created an alternative reality that had little to do with the hardships faced by the increasing number of migrants to the new metropolis. The documentary-like quality of Buñuel’s film is directly related to this insistence on its basis in fact. Before filming *Los olvidados*, Buñuel spent a great deal of time getting to know the environment his film would portray, as García Riera attests:

Durante sus años de inactividad, Buñuel se dedicó a recorrer los rumbos pobres de la ciudad de México. Dedujo de sus observaciones, con ayuda de su coargumentista Luis Alcoriza . . . una historia de niños y jóvenes reducidos a la miseria y la delincuencia.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Carlos Monsiváis, *Historia general de México*, 1998, p. 1527.

⁵⁵ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 175.

Buñuel's choice of an establishing shot of Mexico City, a strip of waste land, implicitly calls into question its place in the roster of great cities. Throughout the film, public spaces are overwhelmingly arid, marginal or the sites of construction.

Michael Wood describes Buñuel's vision of the city as follows:

It is a place of shanties and hovels, rickety structures that seem to be waiting for the wolf to blow them down; of deserted lots, empty patches of dust and grass; and of new constructions going up, large ambitious, modern buildings. Like Godard's Paris, Buñuel's Mexico City is permanently being built.⁵⁶

The protagonists of the film go about their business oblivious to these developments, however. There is a permanent underworld composed of shanties, bars and correctional centres; they are excluded from the signs of progress that the city manifests. The populated places in the film, most notably the market, are commercial sites that allow for crime and exploitation in various forms. The initial attack on the blind man, Don Carmelo, takes place in the crowded market as he plays music for an audience while a gang attempts to rob him. He in turn exploits the location when he meets the peasant boy Ojitos, who has been abandoned and who is thereafter kept in virtual slavery by the blind man. Even the shacks in which the fragmented families of the narrative live are not refuges but places where individuals cohabit uneasily in poverty and conflict.

⁵⁶ Michael Wood, 'Buñuel in Mexico,' John King, ed., 1993, pp. 49-50.

The pathological natures of the people who inhabit the harsh environment of the city are the direct product of their experiences there. The characters in *Los olvidados* can be grouped into those who still have some tenderness and empathy for others and those who have been so hardened by the experiences they have endured that they care for no one but themselves. The former category includes Pedro, a young gang member who is capable of both violence and great love, particularly for his mother. Meche, a young girl whose brother el Cacarizo is also a member of the gang, is an innocent character, as is Ojitos, the peasant boy who befriends her. The foils to these characters include Marta, Pedro's mother, who both neglects her son and rejects his love harshly. Don Carmelo, the blind man, is a miser who looks back on Díaz's dictatorship with fondness and constantly laments the lack of morality in the modern world, although he is proved hypocritical in his attempts to exploit both Meche and Ojitos. Jaibo is evidently the most self-interested, corrupt character in the film, however.

The action begins as Jaibo reunites with his gang, having escaped from a reform school. He is the oldest and is far more streetwise than the others, who look up to him for precisely this reason. He believes that he was captured after being denounced by Julián, one of the few hard-working members of the community. Jaibo plans the first attack on Don Carmelo, which fails as Pelón's attempt at robbery is intercepted by the blind man, who wounds him by hitting him with a nail-encrusted stick. A few days later, the gang meets the blind man on a deserted lot and they take their revenge, attacking him savagely. Jaibo, as the leader, goes

one step further in his assault by destroying the old man's drum with a stone. His violent nature is further revealed in his attack on Julián, who is tricked into leaving work by Pedro and who is killed by Jaibo in a dirty fight. Jaibo then robs him and gives some of the money to Pedro in an effort to buy his silence. After this, Jaibo leads an attack on a truly defenceless crippled beggar, again showing him no mercy. Jaibo's most pernicious quality is his ability to persuade others to engage in criminal activity. As a direct result of his influence, Pedro is implicated in Julián's murder. He is also sacked from the metalworkers shop where he had found work because Jaibo stole a silver knife. After Pedro is sent to a farm school for delinquents, Jaibo ruins his chances of redemption. Even when Jaibo appears to show some sensitivity, he does so in order to exploit others. He prefaces his seduction of Marta, Pedro's mother, by moving her with a story of his longing for maternal love:

Jaibo: Qué bueno debe ser tener su mamá de uno. 'Ora que la veo a usted, le tengo una envidia a Pedro . . . Fíjese nomás que yo ni siquiera sé mi nombre. Mi padre, nunca supe quién fue. Mi mamá, creo que se murió cuando era yo un escuincle.

The ironies in this comment are many. Although the story is plausible and may even be true, Jaibo is willing to use his tale of abandonment and lack of family contact to take advantage of Marta's maternal tendencies. Until this point, Marta did not seem to have such feelings, however. Throughout the film, she rejects Pedro, who is forced to seek an alternative identity through his connection with the gang. Marta is violent to Pedro, annoyed by his efforts to win her affection

and on one occasion even denies him food, forcing him to steal, an event that has been introduced by Pedro's pitiful complaints:

Pedro: ¿Por qué me pega? ¿Por qué tengo hambre?

Marta: Y lo voy a matar, sinvergüenza.

Pedro: Usted no me quiere.

Marta: ¿Por qué te voy a querer? ¿Por lo bien que te portas, verdad?

Marta, who seems incapable of loving her son, showers affection on Jaibo, even protecting him when she learns that he has stolen the knife from the workshop. A final irony arising from this scene is that the story Jaibo tells of his lack of a father is replicated in the situation at Marta's house. She tells Jaibo that the man with whom she lived died five years previously, but she has a child who is much younger than this, and there is a strong suggestion that her children do not share the same father.

Marta's cruelty towards her son is mitigated somewhat when she tells the judge who sends Pedro to the reformatory the circumstances of his birth:

Juez: A veces deberíamos castigarlos a ustedes por lo que hacen con sus hijos . . . Parece que usted no quiere a su hijo.

Marta: ¿Por qué lo voy a querer? No conocí a su padre. Yo era una escuincla y ni pude defenderme.

Marta's explanation for her lack of feeling towards Pedro shows that from the outset he was fated to be rejected and unloved. She too is part of a cycle of exploitation and violence, however, and Meche's plight suggests that this cycle will continue into another generation. Like Marta, Meche attracts the attention of predatory males. While Jaibo hides in her family's barn, she bathes her legs in milk, unaware that he is spying on her. In an act indicative both of her innocence and contamination by her environment, Meche agrees to let him kiss her in exchange for two pesos. Jaibo wants more than a kiss, and Meche's screams alert Ojitos, who tries to defend her. Meche can expect no such protection from her brother, who ignores her cries and only breaks up the fight between Ojitos and Jaibo for fear that his grandfather will hear.

Meche is also the object of Don Carmelo's lust. Ironically, throughout the film Don Carmelo has complained about the decline in society's standards since his youth. When he learns that Jaibo has killed Julián, for instance, he exclaims: "Debían de colgar por las patas a todos esos criminales, con don Porfirio no se movía nadie, al que robaba un bolillo se lo tronaban para escarmiento. Pero ahora, ni modo." He does not apply these strict moral standards to his own conduct, however. He attempts to fondle Meche when she delivers milk to his house, tempting her to stay by offering her sweets. His treatment of Ojitos, who he employs as a servant and exploits, is similarly dishonourable. Tomas Perez Turrent identifies this aspect of his behaviour in particular as stemming from the

Spanish picaresque tradition.⁵⁷ Like the blind man who keeps Lazarillo de Tormes in hunger and misery, Don Carmelo abuses Ojitos even as he depends on him, and his cruelty leads the good-natured boy to contemplate violence. Iván Humberto points out that the attacks on the crippled man and Don Carmelo were a principal motivator for the horror that the film inspired in Mexican viewers, but the subsequent development of Don Carmelo's character leads to a reassessment of this initial sympathy for him:

Tales escenas produjeron una reacción de rechazo pues los dos personajes atacados, socialmente eran catalogados como merecedores de respeto por estar lisiados. A este principio recurre el ciego cuando es agredido “¡Piedad! Piedad para un pobre ciego indefenso.” Sin embargo, Buñuel va más allá en el tratamiento del personaje de don Carmelo. Lo convierte en un hombre con una carga de resentimientos que lo envuelven en una perversidad oculta tras su aparente bondad. Y no es difícil, después de conocerlo, justificar la acción de la pandilla.⁵⁸

Don Carmelo's status as a character who is far from helpless is underlined by the fact that it is he who denounces Jaibo to the police, an act that leads to Jaibo's death. By then, Jaibo has killed Pedro. The closing scene is profoundly pessimistic. Marta, who repents her lack of affection for Pedro too late, tries to find him, unaware that he is dead. She passes Meche and her grandfather, who

⁵⁷ Tomas Perez Turrent, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 206.

⁵⁸ Iván Humberto, *El cine mexicano de Luis Buñuel: Estudio analítico de los argumentos y personajes*, (Mexico City: IMCINE, 1994), p. 54.

carry Pedro's body on a donkey and deposit unceremoniously in a ravine filled with rubbish.

The contradictory desires and actions of the characters and their inability to rise above their miserable surroundings are indicative of Buñuel's wish to separate the portrayal of poverty from the sentimentality of genres such as melodrama, as García Riera points out:

Los olvidados puede ser vista como denuncia de la miseria, pero es sobre todo un acercamiento solidario a personajes no sublimados por el ánimo sentimental, lastimero y conmiscerativo típico del melodrama: son apreciados como seres humanos verdaderos, capaces de acceder lo mismo a la ternura que al crimen.⁵⁹

The novelty of Buñuel's conception of poverty is illustrated in a further contrast between *Los olvidados* and *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, moreover. Florencio, the drunken layabout who appeared in the latter film, was a figure of fun whose drunken antics were greeted with good-natured laughter by his neighbours. In *Los olvidados*, the detrimental effects of drunkenness are portrayed far more realistically. Julián's father, who appears only twice in the film, is a chronic alcoholic. His hard-working son is forced to trawl bars to find his father and carry him home. At an early stage in the film, Pedro does not hesitate to laugh mockingly as Julián drags his comatose father home. The portrayal of alcohol abuse has shifted substantially, from genial tolerance to cruel laughter at the

⁵⁹ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p.175.

decrepitude of a hopeless drunk. Moreover, Florencio, despite his alcoholism, acted like a good father when a crisis occurred, whereas *Los olvidados* is marked by a complete absence of positive male role models for the young delinquents, as Teshome H. Gabriel remarks:

The theme of the “absent father” and the lack of a stable family unit dominates *Los Olvidados* . . . there are no positive father figures for the youth to emulate. Jaibo stands, therefore, as the only model of urban survival for the boys.⁶⁰

Through the evocation of an environment in which children are forgotten by their own parents and left to fend for themselves, Buñuel unflinchingly exposes the nature of poverty. This is not to say that his film is entirely realistic. One of the scenes that has attracted most critical attention is a dream sequence involving Pedro and his mother. Pedro dreams that he is searching for a hen under his bed but instead finds Julián, who laughs hysterically although his face is covered in blood. Pedro and Marta then have a conversation unlike their normal rows:

Marta: Oye, mi'jito, tú eres bueno, ¿por qué hiciste eso?

Pedro: Yo no hice nada, fue el Jaibo, yo nomás lo vi. Yo quisiera estar siempre con usted, pero usted no me quiere.

Marta: Es que estoy tan cansada, mira cómo tengo las manos de tanto lavar.

Pedro: ¿Por qué nunca me besa? Mamá, ahora sí voy a portarme bien, buscaré trabajo y usted podrá descansar.

Marta: Sí, mi'jito.

⁶⁰ Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World*, (Los Angeles: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 52.

Pedro: ¿Mamá, por qué no me dio carne la otra noche?

At this, Marta offers Pedro a huge piece of raw meat, which she extends towards him as lightning flashes, but Jaibo appears and snatches it from her hands. This dream reflects Pedro's desire to have a closer relationship with his mother and to receive nourishment and affection from her. Her explanation of her distance from him is not grounded in his behaviour and she acknowledges his goodness. These attitudes represent what Freud has termed wish fulfilment on Pedro's part. Even his dream is invaded by Jaibo, however, who disrupts the loving exchange between mother and son in an action that foreshadows his seduction of Marta, whereby he receives the tenderness denied to Pedro. By giving Pedro's character an inner life and a powerful imagination, Buñuel transcends the hyperrealistic constraints of neorealism, as Marsha Kinder observes:

By using this kind of Freudian dreamwork in a realistic text on poverty, Buñuel exposes the limits of the neorealist aesthetic, which, in focusing on the surface, fails to address the subversive power of the desiring machine.⁶¹

The strength of *Los olvidados* lies in Buñuel's captivating portrayal of individuals who are not recognisable types in a familiar environment. Although he certainly attributes the toughness of their characters to the privations they endure, the more positive characters, especially Pedro and Ojitos, have an innate altruism that is

⁶¹ Marsha Kinder, 'The Nomadic Discourse of Luis Buñuel: A Rambling Overview,' Andrew Horton, ed., *Luis Buñuel's The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 18.

only gradually eroded by the corrupt forces they encounter. Even in their desperate circumstances, Buñuel's characters have some choices, however limited, and are defeated when they bow to the influence of the violence and pathology represented by Jaibo. His eventual death at the hands of the police suggests another world in the film, that of order as opposed to the chaos in which the protagonists live. This order deals justly with Jaibo, whose existence threatened society, but fails Pedro, for even a stay in the reformatory cannot protect him from his gang's pressures and his return to crime.

The complex nature of Buñuel's reflection on poverty and the hard-hitting portrayal of its effects meant that the film caused outrage when it was first screened in Mexico City. In fact, it was withdrawn from public presentation as a result of public indignation only days after it opened and provoked such animosity towards Buñuel that it was suggested that he be expelled from Mexico as "un extranjero indeseable."⁶² In his autobiography, *Mi último suspiro*, the director recalls the unfavourable reaction to his film:

Estrenada bastante lamentablemente en México, la película permaneció cuatro días en cartel y suscitó en el acto violentas reacciones. Uno de los grandes problemas de México, hoy como ayer, es un nacionalismo llevado hasta el extremo que delata un profundo complejo de inferioridad. Sindicatos y asociaciones diversas pidieron inmediatamente mi expulsión. La prensa atacaba a la película. Los raros espectadores salían de la sala como de un entierro.⁶³

⁶² Iván Humberto, 1994, p. 34.

⁶³ Luis Buñuel, *Mi último suspiro*, (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, S.A., 1982), pp. 195-6.

The film's reception changed dramatically when it won the best director award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1951, however.⁶⁴ It was acclaimed in the press and praised by Mexican intellectuals such as Octavio Paz, with the result that its second Mexican screening was a success.⁶⁵ Despite its eventual acceptance in Mexico, *Los olvidados* remains a searing indictment of the hypocrisy and inequality of Mexican society. Buñuel rightly points to exaggerated nationalism as the main reason for the rejection of his masterwork. It stands as a milestone in Mexican cinema precisely because of its refusal to pander to the nationalistic euphoria that had been encouraged by previous Mexican films. Although film styles did not change overnight, Buñuel's film paved the way for a more critical, challenging cinema that was to reach its apex in the 1960s, particularly after the events that took place in Tlatelolco square in 1968. The films that are examined in the following chapters owe a great debt to Buñuel's uncompromising vision. Although many of them were made independently, they nonetheless reflect an increased willingness on the part of audiences to accept a less saccharine vision of their country. The influence of Buñuel is also evident in the often unconventional, even anarchic, style employed by several of the directors surveyed.

⁶⁴ Tomas Perez Turrent, 1995, p. 203.

⁶⁵ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 175.

Imagining the Nation: Cinema and the Past

In Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece *Cien años de soledad*, the village of Macondo suffers a plague of insomnia after which its inhabitants struggle to remember even the most basic facts about the past. Aureliano Buendía, a son of the village's ruling family, attempts to stem the tide of forgetfulness by labelling objects and providing instructions regarding their function:

El letrero que colgó en la cerviz de la vaca era una muestra ejemplar de la forma en que los habitantes de Macondo estaban dispuestos a luchar contra el olvido: *Esta es la vaca, hay que ordeñarla todas las mañanas para que produzca leche y la leche hay que hervirla para mezclarla con el café y hacer café con leche*¹

As is often the case in Márquez's writing, the humour of this situation belies a profound philosophical truth — the recuperation of the past is very often an enterprise that involves explanations that are inadequate and cannot do justice to the complexity of history. Moreover, the rather idiosyncratic definitions of the objects mentioned above suggest the limitations of a single viewpoint and the necessarily fragmented experience of summing up the past. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Roland Barthes explores the relationship between the novel and history,

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*, (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1991), p. 138.

pointing to the important role of the preterite past tense verb form, which adds legitimacy to novelistic impressions of the past by making them seem factual:

We now understand what is profitable and what is intolerable in the preterite as used in the Novel: it is a lie made manifest, it delineates an area of plausibility which reveals the possible in the very act of unmasking it as false. The teleology common to the Novel and to narrated History is the alienation of the facts: the preterite is the very act by which society affirms its possession of its past and its possibility. It creates a content credible, yet flaunted as an illusion; it is the ultimate terms of a formal dialectics which clothes an unreal fact in the garb first of truth then of a lie denounced as such.²

If Barthes identifies such power in a linguistic device, then film, which has access to both visual and linguistic resources, must have an even greater ability to conflate reality and fiction when representing the past. The cinematic recovery of the past is further complicated by the artifice inherent in the medium itself.

Skilled filmmakers create illusions that are convincing enough to seem real, so that to approach reality through film seems contradictory. Andrés de Luna notes, nonetheless, that the illusory quality of cinema has not prevented filmmakers from concentrating on, or even manufacturing, historical events:

The relationship between cinema and history is as exciting as it is broad and complex. Since its inception as a mass spectacle, cinema has used history as a source of thematic inspiration. Méliès managed to record a few incidents in his actuality films, such as the

² Susan Sontag, ed., *Barthes: Selected Writings*, (USA: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), p. 47.

wedding of King Edward VII, that were reconstructed in his studio even before the historical events actually occurred.³

Méliès's staging of a major historical event before it actually took place suggests the relativity of historical verisimilitude in cinema. Although historical films must approximate reality in order to convince the viewer, they must necessarily condense events and take a particular point of view if they are to transcend the limits of documentary by engaging the viewer's emotions.

Any discourse on the history of Mexico would be incomplete without reference to Octavio Paz's groundbreaking 1950 work *El laberinto de la soledad*. Although over half a century has passed since this book was first published, it continues to offer valuable insights into Mexican culture and psychology. It is not a definitive thesis, however. For one thing, Paz's opinions were heavily influenced by his own position as an upper-class man who had lived for many years in the United States. Another caveat is the fact that his writings are directed to a particular section of Mexican society, as he himself emphasises:

No toda la población que habita nuestra país es objeto de mis reflexiones, sino un grupo concreto, constituido por esos que, por razones diversas, tienen conciencia de su ser en tanto que mexicanos. Contra lo que se cree, este grupo es bastante reducido. En nuestro territorio conviven no sólo distintas razas y lenguas, sino varios niveles históricos. Hay quienes viven antes de la historia; otros, como los otomíes, desplazados por sucesivas

³ Andrés de Luna, 'The Labyrinths of History,' Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 171.

invasiones, al margen de ella. Y sin acudir a estos extremos, varias épocas se enfrentan, se ignoran o se entrededoran sobre una misma tierra o separadas apenas por unos kilómetros.⁴

Paz's restriction of his discourse on Mexican history and culture to a particular group is perhaps the most objectionable aspect of his work. There are, of course, obvious reasons for excluding people who live in such miserable, marginalised circumstances that they have little time to spend pondering their Mexican identity. To discount people on the basis of poverty and lack of sophistication is dangerously limiting, however, and carries the supercilious implication that such people are not worthy of consideration. This view is contradicted by works such as Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sánchez*, a series of oral testimonies by members of a deeply impoverished Mexico City family. Lewis, noting that the urban poor form a group rarely studied by his fellow anthropologists, remarks on the thoughtful, articulate accounts he has recorded:

Despite their lack of formal training, these young people express themselves remarkably well, particularly Consuelo, who sometimes reaches poetic heights. Still in the midst of their unresolved problems and confusions, they have been able to convey enough of themselves to give us insight into their lives and to make us aware of their potentialities and wasted talents.⁵

Lewis's more inclusive approach to Mexico's poor may be a reflection of

⁴ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981), p. 11. All further references are to this edition.

⁵ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez*, (Baltimore: Penguin Modern Classics, 1961), p. xii.

different times, for he was writing over a decade after Paz. It is certainly related to his training as an anthropologist, and one must note that Paz's book is not intended to be a sociological text but a personal reflection on Mexico. Moreover, Roger Bartra, a more recent commentator on Mexican identity, concurs with Paz that the diverse nature of Mexican society has consistently posed a problem to writers wishing to reflect on its national identity:

Es interesante destacar que en el proceso de construcción e invención de la nación — y, por tanto, del carácter nacional — nos tropezamos siempre con una paradójica confrontación con “lo otro”. En esta confrontación el espacio de la conciencia propia se va poblando de estereotipos e ideas — fuerza que, a su vez, ejercen una relativa influencia en el comportamiento de los habitantes de una determinada nación.⁶

Paz avoids the stereotypical representation of Mexicans outlined by Bartra by insisting on the isolation of the Mexican from his environment. This idea seems paradoxical in light of Mexico's vast population, but Paz's idea of the Mexican as incapable of relating to the idea of a national identity stems from the existential conflict between the individual and society. Paz observes that North Americans are distracted from their solitude by the industrialised nature of their society, but the omniscience of history in Mexico offers no such refuge to its people:

En todos lados el hombre está solo. Pero la soledad del mexicano, bajo la gran noche de piedra de la Altiplanicie, poblada todavía de dioses insaciables, es diversa a la del

⁶ Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía: Identidad y metamorphosis del mexicano*, (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1987), pp. 50-51.

norteamericano, extraviado en un mundo abstracto de máquinas, conciudadanos y preceptos morales.⁷

The very immediacy of history in Mexico, which is evident in the memories of vast plains and monuments to the past, isolates the Mexican from the present and from others in society, therefore. The impossibility of ignoring the past converts history into a search for one's origin, but the complicated trajectory of Mexico's history makes this quest almost quixotic: "La historia de México es la del hombre que busca su filiación, su origen. Sucesivamente afrancesado, hispanista, indigenista, "pocho", cruza la historia como un cometa de jade, que de vez en cuando relampaguea."⁸ The complications and contradictions involved in the search for one's roots are exemplified in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. This influential novel charts the journey of Juan Preciado, who is urged by his dying mother to go to the village of Comala in search of Pedro Páramo, the father who abandoned them. Instead of finding his father, he encounters a strange community that is eventually revealed to be a ghost town. Pedro Páramo, like the other characters in the novel, is dead, and the narrator can only watch helplessly as the ghost of his father crumbles into pieces in the final paragraph:

Pedro Páramo respondió: —Voy para allá. Ya voy. Se apoyó en los brazos de Damiana Cisneros e hizo intento de caminar. Después de unos cuantos pasos cayó, suplicando por

⁷ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 18.

⁸ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 19.

dentro; pero sin decir una sola palabra. Dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras.⁹

The quest for identity portrayed by Rulfo is accompanied by vertiginous signposts that lead to a desolate conclusion. Paz provides certain milestones for the reader who seeks the origins of Mexican identity, however. The first of these is the Conquest, which destroyed Mexico's rich pre-Columbian civilisation and imposed a Spanish system that was both medieval and repressive.¹⁰ By far the most important break with this system, according to Paz, was the Mexican Revolution, which negated Spanish influence, the politics of the Reform period and Porfirio Díaz's European-style rule. The Revolution's key significance was that it led Mexicans to contemplate their identities, although it did not create a consensus in the country:

La Revolución mexicana nos hizo salir de nosotros mismos y nos puso frente a la Historia, planteándonos la necesidad de inventar nuestro futuro y nuestras instituciones. La Revolución mexicana ha muerto sin resolver nuestras contradicciones.¹¹

Although as Paz points out, the Revolution did not bridge the gap between Mexicans or lead to a definitive national identity, it did point the way to modernity. The confidence in Mexico's progress was confirmed decades later by the holding of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. This momentous event

⁹ Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo y El llano en llamas*, (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1999), p. 101.

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 148.

¹¹ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 155.

attracted the attention of the world's media and coincided with student protests in Tlatelolco Square that were brutally repressed by government forces. This violent assault on peaceful protestors moved Paz to issue a new version of *El laberinto de la soledad* and to openly condemn an act that wiped out Mexico's signs of progress and harked back to years of dictatorship and repression:

Así, en el momento en que el gobierno obtenía el reconocimiento internacional de cuarenta años de estabilidad política y de progreso económico, una mancha de sangre disipaba el optimismo oficial y provocaba en los espíritus una duda sobre el sentido de ese progreso.¹²

The shock provoked by the events of 1968 makes it a fitting point of departure for the cinematic exploration of Mexican history. The illusion of democracy was shattered, freedom of expression was threatened, and, worst of all, the massacre went virtually unnoticed in the international and national media. Paz used an analogy with the violent tendencies of the Aztecs in an attempt to come to terms with the murders, a correlation that Bartra rejects:

No es sorprendente que Octavio Paz . . . haya tenido que recurrir al arquetipo de la antigua barbarie azteca para explicar la masacre de 1968 en Tlatelolco: se supone que los sacrificios sangrientos en lo alto de la pirámide, que aseguran la vuelta del tiempo, son convocados por el despotismo presidencial del gobierno de Díaz Ordaz. La explicación de Octavio Paz sólo hace referencia a la abrupta intromisión del tiempo cosmogónico

¹² Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad, Posdata, Vuelta a El laberinto de la soledad*, (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1981), p. 236.

arcaico en el espacio de la modernidad. Pero la miseria y el sufrimiento del hombre moderno ya no pueden ser atribuidos a los antiguos dioses ni a los antiguos amos.¹³

Paz's explanation of the massacre is too precise and suggests a direct correspondence between one kind of violence and another. The chaos that resulted from the clash between students and the army in 1968 certainly reflects an effort to restore order to society, but it lacks the spiritual dimension associated with Aztec sacrificial rites. Mexican history has experienced many different kinds of violence, of which this type of government-sponsored assault on peaceful citizens remains one of the most disconcerting. The massacre had a profound effect on Mexican society, not least in its cinema. A new way of imagining the nation had to be found because the image of a forward-thinking democracy lay in ruins, as García Riera affirms:

Se ha dicho con razón que México ya no sería el mismo después del exaltante movimiento estudiantil y de su sangrienta represión . . . tampoco el cine mexicano sería nunca más el mismo, pese a que una mayoría de películas de producción privada aspirara a lo contrario. En definitiva, el movimiento estudiantil no alentó tanto el espíritu revolucionario como las exigencias sociales de democracia y libertad. Así, a ojos de muchos espectadores antes desinteresados del todo por el cine mexicano, pasó a ser evidente otro contraste . . . el advertible entre las películas acogidas a rutinas comerciales cada vez más degradadas y las hechas con espíritu libre y renovador.¹⁴

¹³ Roger Bartra, 1987, pp. 159-160.

¹⁴ Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, (Vol, 14, Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1994), p. 7.

As had happened after the Cuban Revolution, the events at Tlatelolco inspired filmmakers to consider the trajectory of their nation. Only one film attempted to recreate the military attack directly after it took place. Students and staff at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos used footage taken at the square of protesting students being shot and savagely attacked by government troops to make a feature film the following year. Directed by student Alejandro Joskowicz, *El grito* was rarely seen in public. Moreover, its structure proved wanting, for, as Jorge Ayala Blanco notes, it lacked commentary and titles that would provide a context for the action, with the result that it was almost unintelligible to spectators unfamiliar with the events portrayed.¹⁵ Government repression and official denial of the massacre made the subject of Tlatelolco taboo, with the result that most of the meditations on Mexico made by a new generation found their expression in films set in the distant past that commented obliquely on the present. New stylistic concerns in the work of independent Mexican filmmakers can also be traced to the influence of the Cuban Revolution. The ethos of the post-Revolutionary cinematic practice in Cuba is outlined by Julio García Espinosa in his groundbreaking essay 'For an Imperfect Cinema.' Espinosa argues that what he terms a perfect cinema, films that are technically and artistically sophisticated, "is almost always reactionary cinema."¹⁶ Urging filmmakers to produce a socially committed cinema, he defends the need to avoid a slick style by addressing "the process which generates the problems"¹⁷ and

¹⁵ Jorge Ayala Blanco, 'El movimiento estudiantil,' *Hojas de cine*, 1988, pp. 59-60.

¹⁶ Julio García Espinosa, 'For an Imperfect Cinema,' Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, (London: British Film Institute, 1983), p. 28.

¹⁷ Michael Chanan, ed., 1983, p. 32.

using a variety of genres to communicate its message. Thus he advocates the creation of a cinematic form that deals in a radically new way with both message and medium. The impact of his treatise was profound among Mexican cinematographers, leading them to both deal with previously undiscussed themes and to present well-worn themes in a novel, often experimental, fashion. Paul Leduc's independently made *Reed: México insurgente* (1970) reflects the ideas of an imperfect cinema in its lack of a linear narrative and revisionist account of a pivotal event in Mexican history.

Leduc's film is part of a long legacy of films about the Revolution, which has its roots in documentaries that reported the latest news about the battles soon after they were fought. The lengthy, divisive, bloody course that the Revolution took and the nebulous ideology behind it make it a particularly difficult subject to capture. It began as a combination of a revolt against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and an expression of peasant unrest. As Luis González acknowledges, Díaz ruled Mexico as if it were his personal fiefdom, and no opposition to his ideas was tolerated: "De 1888 a 1903 será el poder sin más, la autoridad indiscutida, la última palabra, el cállese, obedezca y no replique. Será el presidente-emperador."¹⁸ Despite his despotic rule, Díaz did bring rapid modernisation to the country, developing communications, energy and transportation with advice from his so-called "científicos," who were strongly influenced by the currently

¹⁸ Luis González, *Historia general de México*, 1998, pp. 960-961.

fashionable European model of positivism.¹⁹ González points out that these developments mattered little to the vast majority of the population, however, who still lived in misery and poverty:

La prosperidad porfirica no alcanzó a la gran mayoría de la población. Los millones de pesos quedaron en poder de una aristocracia poco numerosa y vestida de levita, y de una clase media cada vez más poblada, con medio millón de socios vestidos de chaqueta y pantalón. No llegó nada, o casi nada, de la deslumbrante riqueza de México a la muchedumbre de camisa y calzón blanco.²⁰

The peasants were aided in their efforts by leaders who were from the same underprivileged background as themselves or were liberals sympathetic to their plight. The liberal Emiliano Zapata was a small landowner whose lands had been seized. Francisco I. Madero, who governed the nation from 1911 to 1913, was a millionaire businessman. Venustiano Carranza, the president who signed the 1917 Constitution, was a former governor under Díaz.²¹ Francisco Villa, who was of humble origin, became a mythic revolutionary leader who tried to end social injustice. Alvaro Obregón was an undefeated general who later became an idiosyncratic, repressive ruler.²² Having escaped from prison after a failed

¹⁹ James D. Cockcroft, *Neighbors in Turmoil: Latin America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 82.

²⁰ Luis González, *Historia general de México*, 1998, pp. 1011-1012.

²¹ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, pp. 82-83.

²² Andrés de Luna, in Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 172.

attempt to be elected president in 1910, Madero issued his Plan de San Luis Potosí. González outlines its main provisions as follows:

En éste se declaró ley suprema de la nación el principio de la No Reección, se desconoció al gobierno de Porfirio Díaz y a las autoridades cuyo poder dimanara del voto popular. Don Francisco asumiría la presidencia provisionalmente y convocaría a elecciones un mes después de que el Ejército Libertador dominara la capital y la mitad de los estados.²³

Madero's supporters deposed Díaz a year later, and he finally took up office. In 1913, former generals of Díaz's army staged a coup that culminated in the assassination of Madero and his vice-president. Coup leader Victoriano Huerta became a president very much in the mould of Díaz: ". . . Huerta permaneció en la presidencia 17 meses y su gobierno fue totalmente dictatorial a partir del 10 de octubre de 1913, fecha en que disolvió el Congreso de la Unión."²⁴

The diverse personalities of the main leaders of the Revolution were subsumed for a period in their common commitment to land reform and an end to dictatorial rule, but divisions soon emerged. The revolutionaries split into two camps, a radical one, led by Zapata and Villa, and a more moderate one, led by Carranza with the support of Obregón. Carranza made matters worse by insisting on the death penalty for captured members of the opposing faction. By the time he signed the 1917 Constitution, almost 2 million Mexicans, 12 per cent of the

²³ Luis González, *Historia general de México*, 1998, p. 1075.

²⁴ Luis González, *Historia general de México*, 1998, p. 1109.

population, had been killed.²⁵ Despite the apparent triumph represented by this progressive document, the Revolution brought chaos to Mexico. The economy was in ruins, property and infrastructure had been destroyed, disease and food shortages were epidemic and territorial disputes continued as squatters occupied land while others clamoured for restitution of property. Charles Ramírez Berg articulates the disappointments and achievements of the Revolution succinctly:

The Revolution's avowed aims were land redistribution, increased civil liberties, and democracy, but as a force for reform its success was negligible. Although it did end Porfirio Díaz's four decades of tyranny, only modest advances were made in returning land to the campesinos who worked it. The lot of the politically, economically, and socially disenfranchised improved little after the Revolution. The disparity of opportunity between the elites on the one hand and urban workers and rural peones on the other remained relatively unchanged, as did the marginalization of women, Indians, and the poor.²⁶

In light of the Revolution's vague ideology, fractious development and mixed outcome, it is not surprising that a definitive film reflecting on its meaning has yet to be made. The key post-1960s film on the subject, Paul Leduc's *Reed: México insurgente*, represents a significant development away from the hagiography of Revolutionary leaders that marred many earlier efforts to capture the essence of the conflict, however. As Turrent notes, the lack of reflection in earlier films on

²⁵ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, p. 85.

²⁶ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 2.

the Revolution meant that the idea of a class and political struggle was overshadowed by emotion and even sentimentality:

El rechazo de cualquier análisis político confiere a la Revolución en el filme el aspecto de hechos caóticos, inconexos: una serie de mutaciones, de cambios, de golpes de estado caprichosos, en lugar de la revolución global con la coherencia dialéctica de la lucha política, de la lucha de clases. El aspecto político es sacrificado en provecho del anecdótico, emotivo y sentimental.²⁷

Leduc's film concentrates on the life of the American author and journalist John Reed, who is best known for writing the authoritative book on the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*.²⁸ Leduc's film is based on an earlier book, *México insurgente*, in which Reed recounts his experiences as a reporter in Mexico during the Revolution.²⁹ Dennis West suggests that the film shares many of the book's strengths and weaknesses:

Both the film and the book are reportage; the author-protagonist reports what he sees and hears and does not engage in in-depth political-ideological analysis of the Revolution. Both works are episodic and fragmentary: there is no coherent understanding or overarching vision of the Revolution. The Zapatista movement in southern Mexico is not covered, because Reed did not travel there. Both film and book present an effective

²⁷ Tomas Perez Turrent, 'Notas sobre el cine y la Revolución Mexicana,' *El universal*, (August 5, 1971), p. 12.

²⁸ John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, (New York: Boni and Liveright), 1919

²⁹ John Reed, *México insurgente*, (Mexico City: Ediciones Quinto Sol), 1988

narrative perspective: a sympathetic outsider-protagonist who attempts to report objectively from within the revolutionary movement.³⁰

West's concerns about the film's close adherence to the structure of the book are well-founded in light of the film's limitations. Certainly the film lacks a contextualising introduction to the events witnessed by Reed, and not all of the important episodes of the Revolution are covered. Reed proves an effective eye through which to channel the story, however. His progress through the country echoes the sporadic development of the Revolution, while the fact that the viewer is forced to see events as he experiences them suggests the subjectivity of any historic account.

The narrative is episodic rather than linear. It follows Reed throughout the period from late 1913, when Mexicans crossed into North America to escape the war, to 1914. Key events include Reed's stay at the camp led by General Urbina, his meeting with Villa after the latter attended the funeral of Abraham González and his gradual conversion from an objective bystander to a participant in the Revolution. The film is extremely successful in evoking the era in which it is set, largely through its sepia-toned tinting, which gives the black-and-white film an antiquated look. Its semidocumentary approach to its subject is achieved through the use of devices such as voiceovers and titles that comment on or contextualise the events portrayed. The portrayal of the poverty and lack of order in the

³⁰ Dennis West, 'Reed: Insurgent Mexico,' *Cineaste*, (Vol.22, No.1, April 1996), p. 53.

regiments shown in the film is convincing, while images of the long periods during which the troops sit and wait to the fast-paced, disorganised battles gives an authentic picture of the war. As García Riera points out, the film is notable for the lack of drama it brings to the dramatic event of the Revolution:

Leduc intentó, con fortuna relativa, contar una toma de conciencia política, la del propio Reed; más convincente resultó su recuperación de un modo de ver la revolución afín a la iconografía de la época retratada y tan realista como inusitado, al grado de alcanzar una estremecedora calidad documental a la vez que una desdramatización.³¹

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Leduc's film is that it presents Reed's journey through Mexico in such an undramatic fashion that the events portrayed seem to unfold spontaneously and naturally. Through simple means such as conversations between various characters, he captures many of the central elements of the Revolution. This capability is first notable at the outset of the film, when Reed journeys through desolate, sun-scorched lands with a merchant called Don Antonio. Their horse and carriage is stopped by a small man dressed in rags and carrying a rifle. Without a word, Don Antonio dismounts and gives the man an ear of corn. He retreats to the side of the road and eats hungrily. Don Antonio's commentary on the life of this decrepit man, Don Luis, says much about the hardships endured by soldiers. He reveals that Don Luis had been a soldier in his youth, but he vacillated for a long time before deciding to fight in Villa's troops. When he finally took part in his very first battle, the sound of a

³¹ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 258.

canon firing drove him mad, and he was reduced to wandering like a beggar ever since. The wretched appearance of Don Luis and the matter of fact background information provided by Don Antonio say more about the dark side of war than any dramatic battle scene could. Leduc uses such simply staged scenes throughout the film to make his point clearly without labouring its moral. Given the lack of a clear narrative structure in the film, it is perhaps best approached as a series of character sketches that reveal the motivations behind the Revolution and the consequences of the war for those who fought in it. This tendency to focus on characters whose situations offer insights into political watersheds is a tactic habitually used by Leduc and other filmmakers of his generation, as he notes in a 1991 interview on his oeuvre:

Todo eso viene de mi interés en mezclar lo privado y lo político, lo personal y lo social. También esto es producto de mi generación y, más que de eso, de mi generación latinoamericana. Pienso que eso es un constante del llamado Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano y en realidad todos están haciendo lo mismo: todos están hablando de personajes muy situados en un momento histórico preciso.³²

General Urbina is presented as a rather buffoonish character, who seems more interested in having Reed take a highly posed portrait of him, complete with a sign bearing his name, than in the tactics of war. His men are honourable and committed to the cause for which they fight, however, and Reed's conversations

³² Braulio Peralta, 'Entrevista con Paul Leduc,' *La jornada semanal*, (No.112, August 4, 1991), p. 16.

with them reveal the reasons for the struggle. Immediately after arriving at Urbina's camp, Reed is sent to meet several of the general's men, including the hostile Lieutenant Julián Reyes, Captain Pablo and two soldiers who become his friends, Longino Guereca and Fidencio Soto. In response to his questions about why they are fighting the war, Reyes says that they want to have freedom. This comment provokes a discussion about the nature of freedom that develops into a more detailed explanation of the soldiers' motivations:

Longino: Mire, Míster, aquí las tierras antes eran de los ricos. Ahora son nuestras.

Cuando ganemos esta Revolución, vamos a tener un gobierno de hombres, no de ricos.

Fidencio: Sí, estamos tratando de recuperar la presidencia de Don Francisco Madero, que en paz descance.

Pablo: Cuando la Revolución triunfe, ya no habrá ejércitos. Estamos cansados de los ejércitos. Con ellos nos explotaba Don Porfirio.

The idealistic nature of these comments borders on naivety, especially in the case of Pablo. Longino does not doubt that justice will prevail after the Revolution, despite the fact that land tenure has been such a contentious issue for decades. Fidencio believes that Madero's government will be restored, while Pablo goes so far as to hope that there will be no armies after the Revolution is won, although force will clearly be necessary to maintain the victory he seeks in the light of opposition from Huerta's supporters. The simplicity with which the men express themselves also suggests their lack of sophistication and their inability to address the complexities of their situation. Villa's comments on the war are far more nuanced, and he points out the divisions in the nation when he criticises Huerta's

supporters for opposing his troops, who come from the same background and have suffered the same deprivations. Another character who acknowledges the ambiguities of the Revolution is the former school teacher who falls in battle. Unlike Urbina's men, who seem not to contemplate failure or the possibility that even victory could bring only a measure of reform, he notes that land had been promised to the people by Madero but that nothing changed. The simplicity with which the soldiers articulate their goals suggests a focus that seems to be lacking on the part of their leaders, however, and shows how their decisive will motivates the war, as Tom Foley points out:

We see that the common people are utterly, unmistakably clear on what they are fighting the revolution for — land — but that often their leaders are not. And in the process we arrive at a clear understanding of why it is said that the masses are the real makers of history, and why revolutions often follow zig-zag courses of development.³³

Reed's own situation reflects the complex realities faced by the men, although their stoic acceptance of fate contrasts sharply with his anguished confusion. Reed is tormented by his feeling that reporting alone is not a satisfactory response to the events that he is witnessing, and he fears that his vocation is an indication of his cowardice, as he confesses to Longino, who becomes his best friend:

³³ Tom Foley, 'Education of a Journalist,' *Daily World*, (September 17, 1974), p. 8.

A lo mejor van a matarme, pero el peligro es de ustedes, ¿entiendes? Ustedes están luchando por sus tierras, por su patria. Yo no, Longino. Yo estoy aquí quizás para, para sentir miedo, para sentir que soy valiente, no tener que luchar ni tomar un rifle.

Longino: Mire, Juanito, pero pues sí tú te metiste aquí en la bola para contar la verdad, ¿no? Y eso es muy bueno, muy bueno, Juanito.

Again Leduc captures in this deceptively simple scene the contrast between a man of action, symbolised by Longino, and a contemplative man like Reed. Reed struggles to accept that his reports on the Revolution will make a difference, but his frustration is evident when he is excluded from battle, and he eventually participates in the action around him. Significantly, he does not take up arms but takes part in looting after victory at the Battle of La Cadena leaves a deserted town to be ransacked by the troops. This change in direction from passive spectatorship to participation on the part of Reed is accompanied by a stylistic shift to a fast pace from the rather laconic movement of the film up to this point, as Gabriel notes:

The slow rhythm and pacing of the film's style (in the beginning parts) gives way to a quicker rhythm signalled by a shattering of the store window where Reed sees his own reflection. As Reed becomes a revolutionary, the ease with which a viewer witnesses the transformation is also broken.³⁴

³⁴ Teshome H. Gabriel, 1982, p. 49.

Gabriel's assumption that this radical act by Reed discomfits the viewer is echoed by Ramírez Berg, who suggests that the film's conclusion points to the moral degeneration of Reed. He also finds the presentation of Leduc's meditation on the Revolution through Reed extremely problematic:

The film's biggest problem is its perspective, which throws the entire film off center. On the surface, the fact that it is being told from a reporter's point of view justifies its documentary look. In reality, though, it is told from an American's point of view as filtered through the perspective of Leduc, a Mexican intellectual. Further distancing the film from its Mexican audience is the fact that it is a Mexican film with an American protagonist played by a dark-skinned Mexican actor who speaks Spanish. Mexican viewers could rightfully ask whose story is being told by this confused and conflicted film — Mexico's or John Reed's.³⁵

This analysis raises some interesting questions. The objection to a Mexican playing the title role seems rather irrelevant, as even if the actor had been North American, his character would reflect Leduc's interpretation of the Revolution. Indeed, Foley praises Claudio Obregon's performance and notes that his "close physical resemblance" to Reed plays an important part in the film's authentic recreation of the period in which it is set.³⁶ A more serious matter is the film's focus on Reed's experiences of the Revolution rather than on the Revolution itself. Given the fact that the film was made only two years after the massacre in

³⁵ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 204.

³⁶ Tom Foley, 1974, p. 8.

Tlatelolco, it is surely no coincidence that Leduc chose to view the Revolution through Reed's eyes. Reed, like the participants in the protest of 1968, was a young man, a former student at Harvard, with left-wing radical leanings. It is significant, moreover, that he sides with the radical element of the anti-Huerta wing and that his frequent musings on the balance between indirect or direct political participation lead him to act, as did the students who protested in 1968. The fact that he is a journalist also provides a significant reflection on contemporary events, for journalists generally ignored the government repression in Tlatelolco, so that Reed's rejection of journalism as a tool for social change seems logical and direct action seems the only choice left. Precisely because of his choice of so apt a protagonist, Leduc managed to create a realistic portrait of the Revolution that had profound resonances for Mexico in the 1960s.

The tragedy at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco was inspired by both international and national circumstances. As the Vietnam War raged, students in North America protested and demanded an end to political and social orthodoxy. In France, 1968 was also a year of intense anti-government protest led by students. Latin America experienced the so-called literary boom, as the work of writers such as Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez, Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa and Mexico's Carlos Fuentes attracted worldwide attention. Young people in Mexico, like their counterparts elsewhere, were becoming aware of radical social and cultural changes to which they responded eagerly, as Moises Viñas points out:

El triunfo de la Revolución Cubana, la resistencia vietnamita a la intervención extranjera, las hazañas y muerte de Ernesto *Che* Guevara en Bolivia, así como una nueva sensibilidad juvenil que se venía dejando apreciar desde varios años antes y que partía del rechazo a los modelos de vida tradicionales y se expresaba desde el uso generalizado de la minifalda, la música del grupo inglés *The Beatles* y con el estilo desenfadado de la moda masculina impuesta por él y la militancia política de diversas tendencias, hablaban de la necesidad de un cambio de las estructuras políticas, sociales, económicas y culturales del mundo.³⁷

To the potent cocktail of these influences was added the special position of Mexico City in 1968 as the host city of the Olympics, an unprecedented honour. Mexico was the first Latin American country to stage the games, and the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz saw the event as a unique opportunity to show the world that Mexico was a forward-looking, civilised nation. There was no tolerance of anything that could possibly taint this image of Mexico, and any opposition to the government would be harshly put down. Díaz Ordaz was not alone in seeing the Olympics as a valuable opportunity to hold the attention of the world, however. Students had protested throughout the year, calling for an end to state oppression and revealing the tensions behind the façade of a progressive Mexico. The leaders of the student Movimiento devised a six-point petition calling for the punishment of those responsible for repression, the

³⁷ Moises Viñas, *Historia del cine mexicano*, (Mexico City: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural/Dirección de Actividades Cinematográficas, 1987), p. 196.

suppression of Article 145 of the Penal Code regarding social dissolution, the dismissal of the chief of police, freedom for political prisoners, the granting of compensation to the families of the victims and the disbanding of the riot police.³⁸

On October 2, 1968, only ten days before the lighting of the Olympic torch, thousands of students gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco to reiterate their demands and voice their frustration with the government. As the peaceful protest ended and the students began to leave the square, helicopters hovered overhead. The army moved in using the disproportionate means of tanks and machine guns to subdue the participants. A report by an anonymous student protestor vividly illustrates how the peaceful protest suddenly became a state-sponsored bloodbath that terrified those who were caught up in it:

Hasta ese momento no habían sonado los balazos. El hombre que estaba al lado de mi esposa quiso pasar por la valla y fue muerto instantáneamente frente a nosotros con una pistola 45. En ese momento todos los hombres que estaba en esa fila sacaron sus pistolas, pistolas automáticas Luger, revólver 38, pistolas calibre 22: no había uniformidad en la portación de armas; una vez caído el hombre todos dispararon al mismo tiempo por encima de nuestras cabezas, nosotros a un metro de ellos. En ese momento, es terrible, eso es lo terrible, nos olvidamos completamente de los ideales del movimiento estudiantil, de México y de la revolución, en lo único que pensábamos era en prevalecer.³⁹

³⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, *Historia general de México*, 1998, pp. 1501-1502.

³⁹ Orlando Ortiz, 1978, pp. 368-369.

Over 300 people were killed and hundreds more were wounded, but little news of the massacre reached the Olympic Village or the world press.⁴⁰ Official denial of the carnage and the terror it inspired in Mexicans led to a general lack of reflection on the event. The negation of the government's butchery was so deep that even two decades later, when the screenwriter of *Rojo amanecer* (1989) attempted to get his script produced, he encountered censorship and a reluctance to confront the past. As one would expect, the army was not eager to lend its services to a film that would uncover the reality of one of the most shameful episodes in its history. A restrictive budget also proved to be an obstacle:

El Ejército no nos prestaría a sus soldados y tanquetas para filmar una película en que ellos aparecerían como responsables directos de la represión; y tampoco había presupuesto para marchas estudiantiles, ropa de época, conjuntos espectaculares, etcétera.⁴¹

These problems were overcome by locating the action in an apartment on Tlatelolco Square, from which the members of a family react to the mayhem that they see and hear outside. The policies of the censorship board proved a more formidable obstacle, however. Instead of banning the film outright, the board's director reserved judgement on it so that it was impossible to screen it. Only after a great deal of agitation did the film finally reach cinema theatres, with an important proviso: "se autorizaba la película, a cambio de cortar toda referencia al

⁴⁰ Carl J. Mora, 1982, p. 112.

⁴¹ Xavier Robles, 'Contra la censura,' *La jornada*, (October 5, 1991), p. 8.

Ejército, unos cien segundos de pantalla en total.”⁴² As García Riera observes, the failure to present the military’s key role in the massacre is inaccurate historically, although he considers the film effective overall:

La película resulta estremecedora pese a que la censura, real o posible, forzó graves inexactitudes en su historia: la familia protagonista, habitante de un departamento en el edificio Chihuahua, es masacrada por unos tipos armados a quienes se tuvo buen cuidado de no ver como militares, pues no se osó aludir con claridad a las responsabilidades del ejército nacional.⁴³

Although the restrictions imposed by censorship and the film’s lack of shots that directly communicate the part played by the military in the massacre are obvious drawbacks, clearly *Rojo amanecer*, directed by Jorge Fons, could not have been made without these concessions. Moreover, Mexicans watching the film would be keenly aware that the military was the force behind the attack, so that graphic images were not necessary. The filmmakers use their limited resources to great effect, furthermore. The claustrophobic atmosphere in the apartment and the fact that the family involved is not fully aware of the extent of the violence for some time heighten the tension felt by the viewer.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the film is its accurate presentation of a middle-class Mexican family in the 1960s. The family’s members reflect the changes that Mexican society has experienced since the Revolution. The maternal

⁴² Xavier Robles, 1991, p. 9.

⁴³ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 372.

grandfather, Don Roque is an ex-soldier, constantly harks back to his own youth. He compares his grandchildren unfavourably with his standards for young people, saying “la juventud de ahora ya no es como la de antes” and “córtate el pelo, pareces maricón.” The parents, Alicia and Beto, a housewife and a bureaucrat, represent a formerly idealistic generation browbeaten by fear. Their outlook is defined by the refrain repeated by both: “Con el gobierno, no se juega.” The children are divided by age into two groups, the school-going younger children, Carlitos and Graciela, and the university students, Jorge and Sergio.

The film opens with a breakfast scene that underlines the divisions between the generations. At first, these are the subject of jovial bickering, as the long hair favoured by the older sons and Graciela’s taste for The Beatles lead Beto to criticise his children good-naturedly. The conversation turns serious when the boys discuss their political activities. Beto warns his sons that these types of demonstrations achieve nothing and that they should not get involved. This intense discussion is played out amid television reports that the Olympics are imminent and that guerrillas have been captured before they could disrupt the Games. With the silent approval of the grandfather, Beto angrily urges his sons to keep away from the meeting in the square later that day before he departs for work. Having sent her father to get some food, Alicia repeats Beto’s warning and outlines the danger of their situation: “Ya ves cuantos muertos hay, cuantos desaparecidos, cuantos estudiantes en la cárcel. Ellos quieren terminar con esto antes de las olimpiadas.” The brothers passionately voice the demands of the

Movimiento's petition and explain that their university has been attacked by the army, leaving students dead and forcing them to take a stand. They leave, and she goes about her chores, with shots of the clock marking the passing of time and creating an air of expectancy throughout the day.

In the afternoon, the younger children, the grandfather and the mother have lunch, and the mother reluctantly allows Graciela to go to her friend's house, although by this time there is considerable commotion in the square outside, as thousands of students have gathered. Moreover, there is a power cut and none of the telephones in the area are working. Alicia asks her father what will happen, and he tells her that while he and Carlitos were playing with toy soldiers on the roof of the building, marksmen appeared and looked down on the activity in the square. He comments dispassionately on the likely outcome of a student-army confrontation: "Ahora sí que la cosa se pone difícil, les darán unos buenos palos a esos malcriados que bien lo merecen. Meterán en la cárcel a los agitadores y ya. Eso es todo." His dismissive attitude to the protests suggests that he sees them as pointless and that the students deserve to be rebuked for daring to challenge authority. His calm assessment of the situation infuriates his daughter, who asks him how he can be so detached when her sons could be in danger. He replies that he has tried to warn them, but it is clear that he is unaware of the gravity of the situation as he mockingly comments on a speech heard from outside calling the students to participate in a new revolution: "¡Revolución! Deberían de vivir una para que sepan lo que es. ¡Babosos!" Ironically, it is through the cynical eyes of

the grandfather that the enormity of the conflict between the students and the army becomes apparent. An announcement is heard that the meeting is over, and the students are asked to leave quietly. Carlitos and his mother watch as the violence erupts. Don Roque pulls them away from the window and he witnesses the carnage in the square, horrified. As a result, he moves from confidence in the army and government to shock at what he sees. His simple question, “¿Por qué?” suggests the meaningless brutality of the attack. A further irony lies in the fact that the name of the magazine in Sergio and Jorge’s bedroom that denounces a murderous rampage by the army at the university is also called *¿Por qué?*, suggesting that even the reactionary ex-soldier cannot but despise such action.

The violence outside invades the apartment as a bullet comes through the window, hitting a picture of Christ opposite. Again and again, the camera returns to the image of the window penetrated by a bullet that has shattered both the security of the family’s dwelling and the certainties represented by the religious picture. Domesticity and faith are no match for the military power encapsulated in this powerful image, which crystallises the family’s destruction. The tension mounts as the trio take refuge in a dark back bedroom. Some time later, Jorge and Sergio return, with four other students, one of whom has been shot. The remainder of the film is structured around the correspondence between the events in the apartment and outside. One of the students burns his identity card, saying “En estos tiempos es más peligroso ser estudiante que criminal.” Alicia destroys the propaganda that the female student carries with her. Meanwhile, Don Roque

has gone to collect Graciela, and they return accompanied by a soldier who demands to see his serviceman's papers as proof of his identity. Graciela's description of the scene she has witnessed as they made their way home indicates the heartlessness of the troops: "Estaban levantando muertos por todas partes. Y los soldados, mamá, se reían, se reían." The fighting outside continues sporadically until 10.50 p.m., when Beto finally arrives, visibly shaken. He allows the students to stay, for he realises that to put them out would be to sentence them to death at the hands of the soldiers still in the square. A censored television report attributes the violence to a fight between two groups of students and puts the death toll at 20 before moving on to a jaunty report on the Olympics. During the night, when all the protagonists have gone to sleep, plain-clothed paramilitaries burst into the apartment, and on finding the students, kill everyone except Carlitos, who hides under his bed. He emerges the next morning and picks his way through the bodies of his family and the students to arrive at the square, which is covered in rubbish and patrolled by soldiers.

The fact that violence is directly presented in only a few short scenes before the climax where the family is slaughtered suggests that the real focus of the film lies elsewhere. Instead of recreating the massacre, Fons concentrates on the way in which it shattered the faith of Mexicans in their government and in their image of their nation. This point is underlined by the representative nature of the family, which spans three generations, each with its own view of Mexico. The most conservative figure is the grandfather, who sees his participation in the Mexican

Revolution as legitimate action but who disparages the activism of his grandchildren. He strongly disapproves of what he considers to be the weakness and laziness of young people and is constantly associated with action, even in the games he plays with Carlitos, which revolve around war. His certainty that the military will deal fairly with the protestors and his faith in the army are borne out to an extent when his status as an ex-soldier allows him to bring Graciela safely home, accompanied by a soldier. His belief in the honour of soldiers is shattered by subsequent events, however, and he is killed at the film's conclusion despite his belief in the system. The same is true of Beto and his wife, who are confident at the outset of the film that one can keep out of trouble by eschewing activism. The way in which violence invades their home despite their best efforts and Beto's position as a bureaucrat demonstrates that the violence perpetrated by the government is indiscriminate and inescapable. Even Jorge and Sergio, who proclaim themselves radicals, are revealed to be innocent and unaware of the severity of their plight as they take refuge in their parent's home with their fellow students. After they escape from the carnage that has taken place in the square, they remain sure that their father's position will allow them to emerge from their involvement unscathed. José Homero has pointed to the allegorical dimensions of the *mise en scène*:

La claustrofobia y la oscuridad del filme obedecen a las limitaciones financieras y de libertad del filme y a la fidelidad a los sucesos reales, pero de igual modo funcionan

como metáfora de la desinformación, de la atmósfera nebulosa que la mentira de la prensa y el gobierno engendran.⁴⁴

Homero overlooks the most important symbolic element of the film's staging, however. The physical isolation of the family, which is cocooned by its misplaced faith in the system, reflects its distance from the reality of Mexico as a corrupt, violent and repressive state that will stop at nothing to protect its image as a progressive nation, as Luciano Castillo makes clear:

Ese núcleo familiar, esa especie de huevo — como lo califica el productor y actor Héctor Bonilla — encerrado, ajeno, no participe de lo que está sucediendo en el exterior, de repente es absorbido por la realidad.⁴⁵

The denouement leaves no doubt as to the ruthlessness of the state and its lack of regard for the nuances involved in what it sees as insurrection. The older and younger generations alike are butchered, regardless of the extent of their participation in anti-government activity. The final scene, which follows Carlitos's journey from the apartment to the square below, is perhaps the most chilling of the entire film. He gazes uncomprehendingly at the deserted space, which is being cleaned to wipe away all trace of the massacre in a reflection of the official denial of the event described by Rafael Medina de la Serna:

⁴⁴ José Homero, 'Rojo amanecer,' *Dicine*, (No.39, May 1991), p. 12.

⁴⁵ Luciano Castillo, 'Rojo amanecer,' *Cine Cubano*, (No.132, July—September 1991), p. 24.

La cámara se asoma a la plaza por segunda vez liberando a la ficción de sus tensiones pero saturándola de significados ominosos: en la explanada, el personal de intendencia realiza labores de limpieza; una vez perpetrada la infamia, conviene intentar borrarla de la conciencia colectiva y de la historia.⁴⁶

This powerful conclusion points to the official amnesia regarding uncomfortable historical truths. Like the family that becomes disposable when it represents an obstacle to the government's ambitions, the evidence in the square is incompatible with the façade that Mexico wants to present to the world during the Olympics and so must be disposed of at once. Through his evocation of the shattering of the certainties held by a typical family and the subsequent removal of the evidence of the massacre, Fons eloquently suggests the relative nature of truth and historical accuracy.

The situation of indigenous people in Mexico has been largely ignored by Mexican filmmakers. Mexico's pride in its rich pre-Columbian heritage is reflected in the lavish Museo de Antropología in Mexico City and the attention devoted to the ruins at Teotihuacán and other sites. The plight of contemporary indigenous people inspires more shame than pride, however. Indian peoples who persist in following the traditions of their ancestors live in poverty on the margins

⁴⁶ Rafael Medina de la Serna, 'Rojo amanecer,' *Dicine*, (No. 37, November 1990), p. 21.

of society and often endure violent racism.⁴⁷ The fact that the Chiapas Indians who formed the Zapatistas were driven to take up arms to demand land redistribution and an end to the exploitation of their natural resources by outsiders is indicative of the deep social inequality that persists in Mexico. Not surprisingly, the Indian image is rarely seen in films, as Ramírez Berg points out:

Truly the Indian question is a hypersensitive national sore. Revered in history, Indians are neglected in fact, relegated to the fringes of Mexican life. The same is true in the movies where, in the main, *los indios* are Mexican cinema's structured absence.⁴⁸

The 1990s seemed to mark a change in this pattern of cinematic neglect of indigenous people, however. On the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World, the time had come at last to reassess the meeting between cultures that ensued. Two major films on the subject of indigenous Mexican culture appeared in 1990 — Juan Mora Catlett's *Retorno a Aztlán* and Nicolás Echevarría's *Cabeza de Vaca*. Mora Catlett's avant-garde film attempts to recreate the pre-Hispanic world with reference to the codices. Echevarría's film, which will be examined here, is a more innovative and ambitious enterprise. Its revisionist account of the Conquest is told through the eyes of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the treasurer of Pánfilo de Narváez's ill-fated voyage to the Americas.

⁴⁷ Duncan Green, 1997, pp. 194-195.

⁴⁸ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 138.

The most enduring legacy of the Conquest is that it provided a vision of the Americas shaped by European perceptions. José Promis suggests that this Eurocentric way of seeing was overwhelmed by the inability of the conquistadors to recognise what they saw as reality, so that the past was forgotten and replaced by an unsettling new vision:

It has often been said that the first sight of America was as if it were in a dream. There is also a school of thought holding that the conquistadors, on reaching the West Indies, forgot their past completely and were as if reborn to a totally new and different life.⁴⁹

Eduardo Galeano suggests that the burden of expectation carried by the new settlers was so great that it prevented them from truly seeing the world they encountered. The majority saw what they expected to find, regardless of the reality that confronted them:

Ya se ha dicho que en 1492 América fue invadida y no descubierta, porque previamente la habían descubierto, muchos miles de años antes, los indios que la habitaban. Pero también se podría decir que América no fue descubierta en 1492 porque quienes la invadieron no supieron, o no pudieron verla.⁵⁰

This idea is supported by Tzvetan Todorov in his seminal text *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, wherein he notes that Columbus was so

⁴⁹ José Promis, *The Identity of Hispanoamerica: An Interpretation of Colonial Literature*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991), p. 6.

⁵⁰ Eduardo Galeano, *El descubrimiento de América que todavía no fue y nuevos ensayos*, (Caracas: Alfadil Ediciones, 1991), p. 119.

convinced that he would find an earthly paradise that he simply ignored any evidence to the contrary:

Columbus's most striking belief . . . concerns the earthly Paradise. He has read in Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago Mundi* that the earthly Paradise lies in a temperate region beyond the equator. He finds nothing of the kind in the course of his first visit to the Caribbean, which is hardly surprising; but on his return journey, in the Azores, he declares: "The earthly Paradise is at the end of the Orient, because it is a most temperate place, and so those lands which he had now discovered are, says he, at the end of the Orient."⁵¹

The explorer's misrepresentation of what he has actually seen is not merely the result of conditioning and an overabundance of expectation. Explorers who sailed to the Americas at the behest of the Spanish monarchs were in a precarious and ambiguous position. On the one hand, they enjoyed unprecedented autonomy. On the other, they were utterly beholden to the monarchy:

Thousands of miles from home, the Spaniard who reached America felt a freedom lent by distance, and, at the same time, the need for decorum as befitting his position in the new surroundings. His was a life of contradiction: at one and the same time being the dynamic conquistador and acting the suppliant role of a courtier—lord of new vassals, but a vassal of his own lord in Spain.⁵²

⁵¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1984,) p. 16.

⁵² José Promis, 1991, p. 25.

The success of the explorers' enterprises often depended on crafting well-received accounts of their experiences, therefore, with the result that language became an essential part of their enterprise. The chronicles of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, for instance, veer between respectful assurances of allegiance to the crown: "y todos a una decíamos de los muchos y buenos y leales servicios que Cortés y todos nosotros los conquistadores le habíamos hecho y a la continua hacíamos" to accounts of the riches sent to Spain by the conquistadors that are notable for their use of intensifiers and hyperbolic similes: "fueron muchas joyas muy ricas y perlas tamañas algunas dellas como avellanas, y muchos chalchiuites, que son piedras finas como esmeraldas."⁵³

Todorov points to other incidents that suggest the complex relationship between language and the Conquest. Citing Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who observes that "They were all groping in darkness, because they did not understand what the Indians were saying," Todorov notes that Columbus's failure to respond to the reality he was faced with was so profound that he even claimed to understand the Indians while simultaneously demonstrating that he did not. Columbus's supposed understanding of Indian languages is in fact based on the accounts of earlier explorers, Marco Polo and d'Ailly.⁵⁴ Language proved crucial to the success of Hernán Cortés's conquest of Mexico many years after the arrival of Columbus. Although the fall of the Aztec empire remains somewhat mysterious

⁵³ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, (Madrid: Historia 16, 1984), p. 141.

⁵⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, 1984, p. 31.

given the numerical advantage of the Aztecs and the supremacy they had achieved in the region despite threats from other challengers, Todorov points to several circumstances that benefited the Spanish invaders. The emperor Montezuma offered little resistance to Cortés's troops, there were internal divisions among the Mexicans and the Spanish had a superior knowledge of weapons.⁵⁵ Cockcroft notes that the contagious diseases carried by the Spaniards also played a role in defeating the indigenous population, who had no resistance to them.⁵⁶ Arguably the most essential factor that granted the Spaniards victory over the Aztecs was related to language, however. Todorov notes that Cortés's initial interpreter, Geronimo de Aguilar, was of limited use, as he spoke only the Mayan language. Far more important was the woman who became Cortés's mistress:

The second essential figure in this conquest of information is a woman, whom the Indians call Malintzin and the Spaniards Doña Marina, without our knowing which of these two names is a distortion of the other; the form most frequently given is La Malinche. She is offered as a gift to the Spaniards during one of the first encounters. Her mother tongue is Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs; but she has been sold as a slave to the Mayas, and speaks their language as well . . . she soon learns Spanish, which further increases her usefulness.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, 1984, pp. 54-62.

⁵⁶ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, p. 76.

⁵⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, 1984, p. 100.

La Malinche's linguistic dexterity not only allowed her to inform Cortés about what was happening around him but to warn him of the many attempts to assassinate him and overcome his men. She has understandably been reviled as a traitor to her people. Her enduring infamy lies in the fact that through her, a dual identity was created for the Americas, for her union with Cortés reflects the beginnings of mestizaje in the New World. Through her, moreover, language becomes not just an instrument for recording history but a tool that could be used to shape the future.

Perhaps the most influential account of the Conquest in modern times is that written by Bartolomé de las Casas, whose concern for the welfare of the Indians ruled by the conquistadors has led him to be called the father of liberation theology. Las Casas's description of the savagery that the Spanish conquistadors displayed towards the Indians they dominated vividly conveys his disgust at the degeneration of their venture. Although he initially supported the Conquest as a crusade to spread the word of God, he became increasingly disillusioned by the cruelty he witnessed toward the native peoples, which he harshly condemned:

Más han muerto los españoles dentro de los doce años dichos en las dichas cuatrocientas y cincuenta leguas, a cuchillo y a lanzadas, y quemándolos vivos, mujeres y niños, y mozos y viejos, de cuatro cuentos de ánimas; mientras que duraron (como dicho es) lo que ellos llaman conquistas, siendo invasiones violentas de crueles tiranos condenados no

sólo por la ley de Dios, pero por todas las leyes humanas, como no son y muy peores que las que hace el turco para destruir la Iglesia cristiana.⁵⁸

Todorov sees Las Casas's solidarity with the Indians as analogous to the position of the explorer Cabeza de Vaca, who wrote of his experiences in a volume entitled *Naufragios y comentarios*:

In his judgments of the Indians, Cabeza de Vaca does not present any great originality: his position is quite close to that of Las Casas (of before 1550). He esteems them and wishes them no harm; if there is to be evangelization, it must be conducted without violence.⁵⁹

Cabeza de Vaca's view of the Indians may be unoriginal, but there is little else in his extraordinary life that is not unique. His unlikely name was inherited from an ancestor who had battled the Moors in 1212.⁶⁰ He travelled to the Americas on June 17, 1527, with 600 men on five ships under the command of Pánfilo de Narváez. The captain of the voyage had recently been named governor of the unexplored lands between Tamaulipas, Mexico, and the tip of Florida. After stopping in the Canaries, Hispaniola and Cuba, the ships were hit by hurricanes, which led to the loss of men, horses and provisions. The survivors were further decimated by Indian attacks when they finally landed near Tampa Bay. Later, Cabeza de Vaca's boat was separated from that of the captain. When he and his

⁵⁸ Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1966,) p. 56.

⁵⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, 1984, p. 197.

⁶⁰ Louis Werner, 'Truth & Fiction Chart A Miraculous Journey,' *Américas*, (Vol. 48, No. 4, 1996), p. 23.

men landed on Galveston Island, he was taken prisoner by Indians and was not reunited with his fellow Spaniards for eight years, during which time he was indoctrinated in Indian beliefs and had walked from Florida to Mexico City. In his account of Cabeza de Vaca's memoirs, Louis Werner suggests that he concentrates on this early part of his life because of the even more humiliating trials he endured in later years:

That Cabeza de Vaca should die penniless and alone after a criminally failed governorship of Paraguay, stripped of honor, title, and fame—lucky indeed to have escaped exile to Algiers—may account for the precedence he later gave to his early years.⁶¹

Echevarría's film is largely faithful to Cabeza de Vaca's own account of his experiences, although he adds some fictional embellishments. The narrative is structured around a lengthy series of flashbacks. It opens with Cabeza de Vaca finally reaching the Spanish settlement in Mexico City, accompanied by three other survivors from the original expedition, Dorantes, Castillo and the slave Estebanico. The setting they encounter appears to be a busy fortress, and a title gives its precise location "San Miguel de Cullacán — 1536." As Cabeza de Vaca sits, mesmerised at the realisation that he has spent eight years in the company of the Indians, his companions tell the Spaniards at the settlement that Narváez and 600 other men perished. When one of the soldiers comments that living with savages must have been difficult, Cabeza de Vaca laughs hysterically, and the

⁶¹ Louis Werner, 1996, p. 23.

first flashback is introduced with the title “La Florida, ocho años antes.”

This scene takes place at night, with the events being dramatically lit to create the stylised atmosphere of a theatre set. A makeshift raft on which men lie ill or dying floats aimlessly along the sea. Through the ravings of one of the men, we learn that the raft represents the remains of an expedition of Spanish navigators. His sarcastic thanksgiving for their situation underlines the gap between the ambitious dreams of the explorers and their desperate present situation: “Y nuestras vestiduras, regias, regias de oro de Indias . . . Nuestras naves, todas perdidas. ¿Es esto toda la España que nos queda? Estos barcos son España. ¿Dónde, dónde? ¿Dónde están estos barcos?”

At length, the first raft catches up with a second, led by Captain Narváez. Cabeza de Vaca, who is attempting to maintain order on the first raft, chides the captain for going so fast that they cannot keep up. He implores him to tie the rafts together or to at least give him some oarsmen, for his men are sick and exhausted. The captain has little sympathy for his predicament, telling him that every man must fend for himself and throwing a black slave, Estebanico, into the water as a mocking gesture of support. Narváez refuses to accept any responsibility for the men on Cabeza de Vaca’s raft and tells them that the time for rules is long gone: “Así que ya los sabes, Don Alvar. Cada uno para el santo que lo cuida y no hay más autoridad. ¡Aquí se acaba España!” The captain’s pronouncement crystallises the situation. Thousands of miles from home, the sailors are forced to accept that their voyage has been a disaster. Although the friar on Cabeza de

Vaca's raft bitterly rebukes Narváez for abandoning the men, he cannot appeal to any higher authority, for there is none and Spain seems not to exist in this foreign land. This establishing scene is a powerful representation of the movement of the Spaniards from civilised behaviour to a savagery that culminates in the cannibalism later rampant among Narváez's men, as Joanne Hershfield points out:

The opening scene in many ways destroys the traditional portrayal of the Conquest as a single, unified, civilized, and triumphant campaign by highlighting a moment of profound disintegration and impotence. In the film, the foundations of Spanish civilization are immediately eliminated one by one, marked first by the removal of elements that defined the men as military subjects of Spain, such as clothing, armor, and weapons. The subsequent breakdown of authority then signals the figurative destruction of Spanish political and military control and the metaphoric death of each man as he is cut off from the foundation of national identity that has defined his personal character.⁶²

The men on Cabeza de Vaca's raft finally reach land, where they bury one of their party. They wander through the brush carrying the sick and trying to find water. Instead, they find elaborate wooden structures hanging from the trees that the friar interprets as witchcraft. Having discovered trunks full of the decaying remains of the men on Narváez's raft, the friar orders everything to be burned to banish the evil presence. As he conducts an exorcism, they are attacked, however, and he walks into the light, cross aloft, with several arrows stuck in his back. Castillo,

⁶² Joanne Hershfield, 'Assimilation and Identification in Nicolás Echeverría's *Cabeza de Vaca*,' *Wide Angle*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, February 1995), p. 15.

Dorante, Estebanico and Cabeza de Vaca are held captive by their Indian attackers until Cabeza de Vaca is singled out and taken away by an elaborately decorated Indian who brings him through a river community with houses on stilts to a shaman and a deformed, armless dwarf, whom Cabeza de Vaca dubs Malacosa. There follows an extended sequence in which Cabeza de Vaca is forced to act as a servant to the pair of Indians and endure the harsh treatment of the dwarf, who physically and mentally abuses him. This entire sequence features dialogue by the Indians in their native language, which is not subtitled. Cabeza de Vaca is at first extremely isolated and occasionally seems on the verge of madness, for his surroundings are completely alien to him and he cannot understand what he is experiencing. On one occasion, he escapes from the compound and flees through the river, running wildly and falling constantly. This chain of events is revealed to be related to the shaman's sorcery, for he has tied a lizard to a stake, around which it runs in circles. When the shaman spits on the lizard, Cabeza de Vaca falls in the water. The lizard's manic trail around the stake is mirrored in the Spaniard's movements, for he finally collapses, exhausted, right at the spot where the lizard is tethered to the stake, much to Malacosa's amusement. This is but one instance of the magical practices that he witnesses and eventually takes part in, becoming a shaman himself after the Indians allow him to go free. For a long time, he wanders alone through harsh terrain, taking refuge in a cave, where he is haunted by visions of the past. He eventually reunites with the three other survivors from the raft, who have been captured, along with some Indians, by another tribe. Another Spaniard, who had travelled

with Narváez's men, is also present and tells them that all the others are dead and that he resorted to cannibalism to survive. He is killed by the Indians, but the others survive when a different tribe attacks the camp. A young Indian boy, Cascabel, who had been captured with the Spanish, is gravely wounded. Cabeza de Vaca heals him with his shaman's powers, winning the trust of the tribe who rescued them, to which Cascabel belongs. Cabeza de Vaca later raises a young girl from the dead, much to the horror of Castillo, Dorantes and Estebanico. Dorantes warns him not to mention this incident to the Spanish if they find their settlement, as they will think he is mad. The idea of lying about the reality he has lived for so many years is very troubling to Cabeza de Vaca, however. Soon after this, the four survivors do encounter Spanish soldiers, who are appalled by their condition and initially find it hard to believe that the bedraggled men are Spanish. At the Spanish camp, Indians are kept in cages, the fortress is revealed to be a cathedral and the soldiers are delighted to learn that Cabeza de Vaca has developed a rapport with the Indians, as they plan to enlist him in finding Indian slaves. When he refuses this request, he is placed under guard and watches bemused and disoriented as Dorante regales the soldiers with his fictional tales of the wonders he has seen, which echo the accounts of Bernal Díaz del Castillo in their eagerness to impress. In response to the question of whether he saw the cities of gold, Dorante invents a fabulous story for his listeners: "Con estos ojos vi una. Amplia y amarilla. Era tal su resplandor que en dos días no pude ver otra cosa. Los templos, las calles, las casas, todo de oro." As Dorante continues to spin yarns, a cart passes bearing the body of Cascabel. Cabeza de Vaca is

distraught, pulls him from the cart and embraces him, crying “¿Por qué?”

The tone changes abruptly in the final scene, in which a massive cross is carried by slaves through the landscape to the beating of soldiers’ drums.

Echevarría’s visually stunning but occasionally impenetrable recreation of pre-Columbian society has led his film to be dismissed or derided by many critics.

The following commentary by Nissa Torrents is typical of many writers’ refusal to engage with the film’s complexity:

It is difficult not to compare *Cabeza de Vaca* (1990) with *Dances with Wolves*, as it shares with Kevin Costner’s film some of the obsessions and some of the pitfalls. The original book, Cabeza de Vaca’s 16th-century diaries of his journey, is almost forgotten in a treatment that owes more to hippy-dippy alternative cosmologies than to the original work. The protagonist, body painted like an African tribesman Hollywood-style, wanders around meeting Buñuel-like dwarfs, and by some magically inverted curative powers curing all and sundry while putting on a convincing show of anorexia. Since Echevarría is a documentary film-maker, the natural settings are impressive but the story, and the history, fail to convince.⁶³

This flippant account of the film is both inaccurate and superficial. Torrents does not even correctly summarise the plot of Echevarría’s film, so it comes as no surprise that she fails to appreciate his vision. The most objectionable point made here is that Echevarría’s film resembles Costner’s. *Dances with Wolves* is a unadventurous, linear narrative that makes use of the device of an outsider’s

⁶³ Nissa Torrents, ‘Mexican Cinema Comes Alive,’ John King, ed., 1993, pp. 228-229.

viewpoint to introduce audiences to strange exotic lands. *Cabeza de Vaca* could not be more different. The fact that a large part of the film is understood only visually by the viewer because the Indian language is not translated means that the perspective of Cabeza de Vaca provides no clues to the understanding of the strange world of the shaman and Malacosa. Moreover, the viewers share his lack of understanding and confusion directly, for neither we nor the protagonist can interpret what is said and done.

Furthermore, the time sequence of the film is jumbled because of the proliferation of flashbacks and sequences that are dreamlike and unrelated to the main story of Cabeza de Vaca's journey and return to the Spanish settlement. The most striking instance in which time is presented as confused and even illusionary takes place when Cabeza de Vaca, lost and exhausted after leaving the Indian shaman and Malacosa, takes shelter in a cave, where he is haunted by visions. He is reunited in his dreams with the friar from his raft, who takes him to meet the ghost of his paternal grandfather, Pedro de Vaca, the conquistador of the Canaries, who is suffering in hell. The old man dances an Indian dance, despite the confines of his heavy armour, and bemoans his destiny. His appearance suggests that history is repeating itself, for both generations of the family seem condemned to be conquered rather than conquerors. This scene is subtly linked to Cabeza de Vaca's earlier attempt to escape, in which he was trapped in a circular movement from which he could not break out. It also reflects the movement of the film in general, which returns to the beginning, the moment in which Cabeza de Vaca

meets the Spanish, after his long odyssey. Time, in the world of the film, is meaningless, for even death can be defeated by shamanic powers, and the true story of eight years in the wilderness can be obliterated in a few moments through false stories of a fantasy world. As Joanne Hershfield observes, the nebulous conception of time in the film serves to distance it from the structure of a conventional narrative:

Although the film seems to be organized chronologically, blocks of time are missing and unaccounted for, external and transient moments are evoked, and links between various sequences remain ambiguous, all of which function to disrupt the continuity of and between time and place, the two primary linchpins of the classical narrative trajectory.⁶⁴

Echevarría's main focus is on the rites in which Cabeza de Vaca becomes versed. He notes in a 1991 interview that his passion for Indian spirituality led him to live with tribal people for two years:

Viví con los huicholes dos años, con los coras . . . En lugar de haber ido a la universidad, me la pasé en la sierra. Esa fue mi pasión: los indios. Y sobre todo, no la cuestión indígena a nivel etnográfico o folclórico, sino la mística y la técnica para lograr el éxtasis. Esa fue mi obsesión;⁶⁵

The choice of spiritual belief as a means of representing the vast divide between

⁶⁴ Joanne Hershfield, 1995, p. 13.

⁶⁵ Garcia Tsao, "La conquista según Nicolás Echevarría," *Dicine*, No. 38, March 1991, p. 11.

the Indians and the Spanish could not be more appropriate. The brutality of the Conquest was justified because of its supposed spiritual dimension, which would lead to the conversion of the Indians to Catholicism. In the film, the only representative of Christianity is the friar, who is ridiculed and abandoned to his fate. Spiritual practices play a far more integral role in the lives of the Indians than in those of the Spaniards, whose construction of the cathedral seems a nationalist urge to establish their identity rather than an expression of faith. Cabeza de Vaca's singular ability to relate to the New World finds its most resonant expression in his ability both to learn the Indian language, which had previously proved a formidable barrier to acculturation, and to adopt Indian beliefs. His ecstatic participation in a healing rite that cures a man of blindness and the joy surrounding his resurrection of the young girl contrast sharply with the dour approach to religion of the Spaniards, who cannot even conceive of such wondrous powers. Through his embracing of native language and beliefs Cabeza de Vaca comes close to completely discarding his own identity. As he discovers a world beyond the tangible, his physical and mental shock are replaced by a strong spiritual identity, as he becomes a shaman in his own right. Thus through the 'other,' he discovers himself. Indeed, his return to so-called civilisation brings as much cultural upheaval as did his initiation into Indian ritual. He realises that the soldiers, like Columbus, want to believe uplifting tales about an earthly paradise rather than the true account of his spiritual awakening. Consequently, unlike the other survivors who keenly put on clothes and drink alcohol, symbols of their Spanish identity, he remains in his rags, removed from both the Spanish and the

Indians at the film's conclusion. The final image of the gigantic cross propelled across the landscape through forced labour again underlines the hollowness of Spanish spiritual practices compared with the vitality of Indian rites. Ultimately, Echevarría's complex film rewards the viewer with its radical recasting of the Conquest. The relationships between conqueror and conquered, self and other and past and present are re-evaluated so that the Conquest becomes less a triumph than a meeting of cultures that remains unresolved and contentious.

In all three films discussed above, a courageous effort to confront topics that have been largely absent from cinematic representation is notable. *Reed: México insurgente* addresses a subject familiar to film but brings a unique perspective to the representation of the Revolution by focusing on a protagonist whose situation was relevant to the time in which the film was made. While *Rojo amanecer* is the most straightforward of the films in terms of cinematic style, it represents a milestone in dramatising a formerly taboo subject. Finally, *Cabeza de Vaca* is a highly innovative account of perhaps the most crucial episode in Mexico's history. All three films are characterised by a personal approach to the material, the rejection of a traditional narrative pattern and a refusal to simplify complex historical events by providing facile conclusions.

The Ties that Bind: Filming the Mexican Family

In his 1969 novel *Boquitas pintadas*, Manuel Puig employs his characteristic blend of personal accounts and popular culture to comment on the frustrations of women trapped by confining social roles. The narrative begins with an exchange of letters between a young married woman, Nélide Fernández de Massa, and Doña Leonor Etchepare, the mother of Nélide's former boyfriend, Juan Carlos. Nélide initiates the correspondence after learning of the death of Juan Carlos, and her first letters are formal expressions of sympathy. She soon expresses her dissatisfaction with her status as a mother and wife, however, as she begins to confide in the older woman. Commenting on the resentment Doña Leonor's daughter Celina feels on being single, she writes:

La idiota no sabe que estar casada es lo peor, con un tipo que una no se lo saca más de encima hasta que se muere. Ya quisiera estar soltera yo, no sabe que la que ganó al final fue ella, que es dueña de ir adonde quiere ¡mientras yo estoy condenada a cadena perpetua!¹

¹ Manuel Puig, *Boquitas pintadas*, (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1972), p. 32.

Realising that she has been too frank, Névida tears up the pages that she has just written and instead composes a letter that offers an idealised version of her family life:

. . yo gracias a Dios tengo una familia que ya muchos quisieran, mi marido es una persona intachable, muy apreciado en su ramo, no me deja faltar nada, y mis dos hijos están creciendo preciosos, aunque la madre no debería decirlo, pero ya que estoy en tren de sinceridad tengo que decir las cosas como son.²

The discrepancy between the two letters says a great deal about the importance of family identity. The first letter is scathingly honest about the shortcomings and disappointments of family life. Névida is stifled by her role as a mother and wife and resents her husband as a burden she is bound to for the rest of her life. The second letter, far from being sincere, as she suggests, is a projection of the family situation she desires. In this version, her husband is not poorly paid and unable to satisfy her desires but a model partner, while her children are a source of delight rather than a troublesome nuisance. The gap between Névida's actual situation and her public fantasy reveals the private and public dimensions of family life. On the level of the interactions between its members, the family is a repository of emotions that may be positive or negative. Regardless of these emotions, it is important to present an acceptable façade to society, as the second letter suggests, for the family unit must fulfil a useful role in the wider world. An important part of the public dimension of the family is its economic sufficiency. Although

² Manuel Puig, 1972, p. 33.

Nélida does not have everything she desires, as she suggests, she must project an image of economic success in order to be acceptable to others. Her situation reflects the changing expectations of women and developments in social customs. Nélida assumed that becoming a wife and mother would satisfy her, but nothing could be further from the truth, and she yearns for freedom. Her attitude is a reflection of the gradual realisation of women in the 1960s that traditional models were not all that they could aspire to and that creating a family was not necessarily fulfilling in itself. The family, long regarded as the ultimate expression of womanly fulfilment, had become for many a patriarchal trap that promised a satisfaction that it did not deliver and that subjugated the desires of the individual. Nonetheless, Nélida's readiness to create an idealised version of family life underlines the fact that although her own dream of a perfect family has been shattered, the notion of the ideal family has such a powerful hold on her imagination that it lingers on in her fantasies.

Although the family structure is so deeply ingrained in society that it seems a natural, timeless phenomenon, it is in reality a historical concept that has evolved through time. Sociologist Judith Stacey points out that the Romans used the term family to describe all the members of the household that were beholden to the *paterfamilias*, whether servants, slaves or blood relations. Up to the year 1400, when the word first appeared in the English language, it continued to include the servants of a house.³ The nuclear family is a relatively modern concept that

³ Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 39.

restricts membership to blood relations, although the social implications of these relationships have not diminished in significance.⁴

Manifestations of the social dimension of formal relationships between a couple and their children are seen in matters such as inheritance rights, which generally favour legitimate offspring, and in the taboo associated with incest. In post-industrial societies, the family is associated not only with kinship ties, therefore, but with economic dependencies, moral standards and considerations such as religious affiliation and social customs. In his 1962 novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, Carlos Fuentes points to the drawbacks of the economic basis of family interaction. The character who gives his name to the work insinuates his way into the family of a man who died at his side during the Mexican Revolution. The patriarch, Don Gamaliel Bernal, is a Puebla landowner who has been ruined by the agrarian changes brought by the Revolution. Despite the fact that both he and his daughter, Catalina, suspect Cruz's motives, Don Gamaliel realises that his daughter's marriage to the wealthy stranger could save the family, and he begs her to comply with his wishes:

— Este hombre puede salvarnos. Cualquier otra consideración sale sobrando. . . Suspiró y alargó los brazos para tocar las manos de su hija.

⁴ For a further discussion of the evolution of the family model, see W.J.H. Sprott, *Human Groups*, (London: Pelican Books, 1958)

- Piensa en los últimos años de tu padre. ¿Crees que no merezco un poco de . . . ?
- Sí, papá, no digo nada. . .
- Y piensa en ti misma.⁵

This exchange suggests the deep emotional ties that connect and at times ensnare family members. Don Gamaliel's unspoken implication is that his daughter owes it to him to ensure that he lives out his years in comfort, even at the expense of her own wishes, as she consents to marry a man she barely knows. His suggestion that she should think of herself is a purely monetary view, as he assumes that the best possible marriage partner for her is a wealthy man. Her unquestioning acquiescence to his proposal is indicative of the pressures family members place on each other and the way in which family dependencies are not always beneficial for each member of the family unit. Above all, this passage makes clear that Don Gamaliel, the family patriarch, is the ultimate figure of authority. It is he who decides the future of the family fortunes through Catalina's marriage to Cruz, even if this means denying her the freedom to choose her own husband.

Sigmund Freud has been foremost amongst 20th-century commentators who have exposed the neuroses that can result from unsatisfactory family relationships. These neuroses include the Oedipus complex, the desire of a son to possess his mother sexually,⁶ or the family complex, a condition that causes people to forget

⁵ Carlos Fuentes, *Obras completas. Tomo I: Novelas*, (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1974), p. 1134.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, (London: Pelican Books, 1976), p. 232.

the names of close relations who cause them anxiety.⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss goes further than Freud by not only exposing the ways in which family interaction can be negative but by questioning the existence of true kinship in families:

Of course, the biological family is ubiquitous in human society. But what confers upon kinship its socio-cultural character is not what it retains from nature, but, rather, the essential way in which it diverges from nature. A kinship system does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals. It exists only in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation.⁸

Lévi-Strauss's analysis points to the fact that family units are the product of cultural traditions, which privilege the institution of marriage and promote family harmony in order to minimise disruption in society. His comments also serve to reveal the tenuous nature of kinship, for, as he acknowledges, it is not based on reality but on the social conditioning that leads people to believe that such relationships are natural. In the 1960s and 1970s, the recognition of the highly artificial nature of family structures led to debates about the very desirability of the traditional family organisation. David Cooper's *The Death of the Family* is one example of an extreme rejection of the traditional family structure:

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 1976, p. 62.

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology I*, (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 50.

The family form of social existence that characterizes all our institutions essentially destroys autonomous initiative by its defining non-recognition of what I have called the proper dialectic of solitude and being with other people. The family over the last two centuries has mediated an invasiveness into the lives of imperializing capitalism.⁹

Cooper's decidedly Marxist view of the family as an enslaving institution ruled by economic concerns leads him to propose commune-like alternatives to replace it entirely. His comments reflect the nonconformity of the era and its emphasis on the individual. The fact that he avoids any discussion of the family on an emotional level renders his reflection incomplete, however, for he fails to account for the persistence of the family model even in times of radical social change.

From the 1950s on, the family has been subject to intense scrutiny and has been forced to adapt to changing social norms. Duncan Green points to developments in Latin America that have resulted from the changes in the family's relation with wider society. These include a sharp decline in the size of the average family, the dramatic increase in the number of female-headed households, the more general availability of contraception, the increasing participation of women in the labour force and the improved educational prospects of women, particularly those of middle-class origin.¹⁰ Judith Stacey points to even more radical developments, such as the growing acceptance of families headed by lesbian and gay parents.¹¹

Clearly, the family has evolved to accommodate such non-traditional models, but

⁹ David Cooper, *The Death of the Family*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 150.

¹⁰ Duncan Green, 1997, pp. 166-171.

¹¹ Judith Stacey, 1996, pp. 109-144.

it has not been discarded. Benedict Anderson, who like Lévi-Strauss makes much of the family's divergence from nature, acknowledges on the other hand that the positive connotations of family life have survived despite repeated attacks on the family as a repressive social unit:

While it is true that in the past two decades the idea of the family-as-articulated-power-structure has been much written about, such a conception is certainly foreign to the overwhelming bulk of mankind. Rather, the family has traditionally been conceived as the domain of disinterested love and solidarity.¹²

Whether or not families attain the unity and harmony associated with the positive image of the unit, Anderson's identification of the inherent desirability of family relations is a key consideration. The family has adapted to the increased liberalism of contemporary society, which accepts new forms of family life that often differ greatly from the model of the nuclear family. The family has by no means proved to be an outmoded concept, and it has yet to be replaced by a satisfactory alternative in most societies.

Mexican culture strongly affirms the idea of the family as the foundation of society. In the public sphere, the family organisation is mirrored in the state. Although generally perceived to be extremely traditional in its assignation of roles according to the unquestioning authority of the patriarch, the Mexican family is sufficiently flexible to accommodate members who are not blood relations:

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 144.

The Mexican family typically is characterised as a large and cohesive familial unit embracing both lineal (i.e., brothers) and collateral relatives (i.e., cousins). Collateral refers to direct descent, hereditary, and secondary-relative ties beyond the nuclear family that are strong and extensive, with the reciprocal rights and duties afforded to all relatives. Unrelated relatives (fictive kin) are also considered to be part of the extended network . . . Through fictive kin, which are referred to as the *compadrazgo* system (i.e., godparents), Mexican children have a second set of parents or guardians.¹³

The Mexican family is inclusive in affording a great deal of status to *compadres*, who are not actually related to the family, and there is little doubt that this extension of familial bonds enriches the members of the family by giving them added support, both financial and emotional. This is not to suggest that the Mexican family is not autocratic, however. In fact, the roles within its structure are rigidly assigned, as Adelaida R. Del Castillo points out:

According to gender-based norms, the family in Mexico is hierarchical in structure, asymmetrical in social and gender relations, genealogical in patterns of residence, and loyal to the family in its moral economy. According to the traditional ideal, men have authority over women, the husband has authority over his wife as does the brother over his sister; and while the older have authority over the younger, the father remains the ultimate authority over the household and family matters.¹⁴

¹³ Jaime Chanin, Francisco A. Villarruel, Ruben Anguiano Viramontez, 'Dichos y refranes: The Transmission of Cultural Values and Beliefs,' Harriette Pipes McAdoo, ed., *Family Ethnicity: Strength in Diversity*, (California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1999), pp. 157-158.

¹⁴ Adelaida R. Del Castillo, 'Mexican Gender Ideology,' Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic eds., *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 499.

Del Castillo's overview of the Mexican family is marked by its concentration on the father as the repository of authority, a view supported by a sociological study conducted by Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero in 1955. Two fundamental aspects of Mexican family organisation are identified by Díaz-Guerrero:

La estructura de la familia mexicana se fundamenta en dos proposiciones principales:

- a) La supremacía indiscutible del padre, y
- b) El necesario y absoluto autosacrificio de la madre.

Desde tiempo inmemorial, el papel de la madre ha adquirido su adecuada expresión en el término "abnegación", que significa, ni más ni menos, la negación absoluta de toda satisfacción egoísta.¹⁵

The study adds that this radical division between absolute authority on the part of the father and utter submission on the part of the mother, both of which are vital to the functioning of the Mexican model, has its roots in Mexican cultural values:

Estas proposiciones fundamentales de la familia mexicana parecen derivar de orientaciones valorativas "existenciales" implicadas en la cultura mexicana, o, mejor dicho, de premisas generalizadas implícitas, o presupuestos socioculturales generalizados que sostienen, desde algo muy profundo, la superioridad indudable, biológica y natural, del hombre sobre la mujer.¹⁶

The gender divisions embodied in these attitudes have a long history in Mexican

¹⁵ Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, *Psicología del mexicano: Descubrimiento de la etnopsicología*, (Mexico City: Editorial Trillas, 1999), p. 35.

¹⁶ Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, 1999, p. 35.

society. They can be traced to the legacy of the Spanish conquest, a male-dominated enterprise that sought to spread the message of the Catholic Church, which had a deeply ambivalent attitude towards women. Although the Virgin mother was revered and her image was adapted to suit Mexicans through the invention of the native Virgin of Guadalupe, women had little power in the church and in society in general. The conquistadors came from a land where women were raised to be wives and mothers, while men were expected to be aggressive and even violent when the need arose and utterly dominant over women, whose chastity was a reflection of the male's honour. The Catholic Church's adulation of the Virgin Mother provided an impossible standard for women to aspire to, as it is based on the contradictory veneration of both motherhood and sexual purity. This exaggerated image of female virtue encourages women to be submissive and to engage in self-denial, so that they will compare favourably to it. The situation of Mexican women is further complicated by the villainisation of the mistress of the Mexican conquistador Hernán Cortés, La Malinche. Accurately or not, La Malinche is almost invariably characterised as a willing conspirator with the Spanish, and her sexual relationship with Cortés is seen as a treachery that all women are capable of because they are her descendants. Thus, the Mexican woman who does not conform to the ideal image of the devout matron must necessarily be a dangerous temptress like La Malinche. The choice between these roles leads to the much-discussed virgin-whore dichotomy in Mexican culture. Even women who choose the former role are burdened by its conflicting demands.

Traditionally, the only clear choice for women in the face of these bewildering options has been to defer to male authority and to deny themselves to an almost masochistic level in an effort to distract from the problematic question of their sexuality. Mexican women's acceptance of this status quo has persisted to a surprising degree, as Díaz-Guerrero's 1970 revision of his original study suggests, although there is increasing ambivalence towards accepting the traditional yoke of abnegation:

De otros datos se observa . . . que la mujer mexicana tiene un gran número de oportunidades para el desarrollo de su vida emotiva y de su papel específico de femineidad. Hay, además suficientes datos para indicar que la mujer mexicana, en general, está contenta con su papel de mujer. Por otra parte, es clarísimo que cada día está menos contenta con las oportunidades que se le ofrecen para su desarrollo cognoscitivo, intelectual, profesional, etc.¹⁷

The report concludes, significantly, by advising that women must be allowed improved educational and professional opportunities to avoid a polarisation of the sexes similar to that in the United States and the breakdown of the “valores sentimentales, afectivos, románticos y amorosos que ha ligado siempre a los hombres y a las mujeres mexicanas.”¹⁸ The implicit argument here is that the emotional ties that have traditionally formed the basis of Mexican families, which in turn create a Mexican society, are of fundamental importance and must be nurtured if the family is to continue. Octavio Paz seems to dismiss this danger,

¹⁷ Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, 1999, p. 306.

¹⁸ Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, 1999, p. 306.

however, arguing that modern mores obscure the continued centrality of the family to Mexican life:

La familia es una realidad muy poderosa. Es el hogar en el sentido original de la palabra: centro y reunión de los vivos y los muertos, a un tiempo altar, cama donde se hace el amor, fogón donde se cocina, ceniza que entierra a los antepasados. La familia mexicana ha atravesado casi indemne varios siglos de calamidades y sólo hasta ahora comienza a desintegrarse en las ciudades. La familia ha dado a los mexicanos sus creencias, valores y conceptos sobre la vida y la muerte, lo bueno y lo malo, lo masculino y lo femenino, lo bonito y lo feo, lo que se debe hacer y lo indebido. En el centro de la familia: el padre.¹⁹

Both these views on the nature of Mexican family life have merit. Díaz-Guerrero's argument is more pragmatic, privileging educational and professional opportunity because of their role in fostering amicable, affectionate relationships between the sexes, so that the family can endure. Paz takes for granted that the family is unassailable precisely because of the emotional charge it carries and its associations with deceased relatives and moral values. The chief divergence in these views of the Mexican family is that Díaz-Guerrero focuses on the mother as the crucial partner, while Paz continues to assert the centrality of the father to the family. He acknowledges that the family, which in his view is a male-orientated model, has broken down in the cities, so the inference is that the values he associates with the family are absent in the "broken" city families because

¹⁹ Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad, Posdata, Vuelta a El laberinto de la soledad*, 1981, p. 313.

the father is not present. Both commentators agree, despite their different opinions on the gender hierarchies at the centre of families, on the emotional weight of the family as a cultural phenomenon. It is therefore not surprising that the family has been the filter for the depiction of social conditions in numerous Mexican films that examine the changing dialogue between family and society.

One of the key tropes that distinguished so-called golden age Mexican films from their Hollywood counterparts was the insistent focus on the family. Carlos Monsiváis has commented on the educational role of the cinema at this time, which persistently used the motif of the family to signify unity:

... the public ... among other things, trusted that its idols would explain how to survive in a bewildering age of modernisation. At weekends, families went to the cinema to find and experience entertainment, family unit, honour, 'permissible' sexuality, the beauty of the landscape and customs, and respect for institutions.²⁰

Two key points emerge from this observation. Firstly, Mexicans went to the cinema as families, seeking not the image of their individuality but of their family togetherness. Secondly, even at this early stage, there was a need for models that would reassure the families in the cinema theatre that the family life depicted on screen was a desirable reality and an institution worth preserving amid rapid social change. The family melodrama, by and large, presented the family in an

²⁰ Carlos Monsiváis, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, ed., 1995, p. 117.

unequivocally positive light and offered inspirational role models. Monsiváis argues that the threats to family unity could not be ignored, however:

In the first half of the 20th century, morality was what the church, family, state and society accepted. Immorality was what lay outside their domain. The melodrama seemed to be an excellent vehicle for securing the hegemony of traditional values. However, the ghosts of disunity also circulate among the familiar melodramatic sets and sounds: honour, adultery, separation.²¹

The tension between the moral sanctity represented by the family and the decadence outside it found its most resonant cinematic expression in the juxtaposition between the idealised mother and the defiled woman, usually a prostitute. The prevalence of these contrasting roles in Mexican cinema represents a furtherance of the opposition between the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Malinche. Perhaps the most accomplished example of the traditional family melodrama is Juan Bustillo Oro's *Cuando los hijos se van* (1941). The film's complex plot centres around a prodigal son narrative in which the father, Pepe Rosales, wrongly believes that his virtuous son Raimundo is a villain because his reputation has been damaged by his brother, José, the real scoundrel. The family matriarch, Lupe, played by Sara García, staunchly defends Raimundo and is proved right when he eventually returns to save the family from financial ruin. Largely as a result of her convincing portrayal of maternal wisdom and abnegation in this film, García became known as the mother of Mexico²² and the

²¹ Carlos Monsiváis, P.A. Paranaguá, ed., 1995, p. 119.

²² Carl J. Mora, 1982, p. 57.

antithesis of the fallen women depicted in films such as Fernando de Fuentes's *La mujer sin alma* (1943), which features a predatory seductress. This cinematic contrast is well articulated by Charles Ramírez Berg:

. . . García typically played the self-sacrificing mother as bedrock of a decent, middle-class household. She was passive, resilient, resourceful, and asexual, with no visible limits to either her goodness or her self-denial . . . The whore has been represented most prominently in the *cabaretera* (B-Girl) genre, tales about the daughters of La Malinche.²³

Although numerous films diverged substantially from this opposition by humanising supposedly debased sexualised women and acknowledging the societal pressures that led to their situations, this continual representation of women as either virgin mothers or whores was unsatisfactory. The changes occasioned by the social revolution of the 1960s made these roles, and particularly the opposition between sexuality and virtue, seem increasingly outmoded. Filmmakers still tended to concentrate on the place of women in the family, but there was no longer an insistence on conformity with patriarchal models. María Novaro's *Lola* (1989) is indicative of the changes in perceptions of motherhood and the departure from conventional, idealised representations of women who place the family above their own identity. The protagonist of this film attempts to raise her daughter in Mexico City after breaking up with the child's father in the wake of the 1985 earthquake. Lola proves unable to cope with her challenging situation and abandons her child, fleeing to the seaside in an effort

²³ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 59.

to forge an identity of her own. This sympathetic portrayal of a woman overwhelmed by the demands of motherhood is but one film that marked a dramatic departure from the glorification of motherhood in Mexican cinema. Post-1960s films have deconstructed the traditional family model, revealing its shortcomings. Alternative family structures have been presented, and a dark vision of family dysfunction, focusing often on incest, has emerged. Parody has also proved an effective tool, most notably in the hands of Luis Alcoriza, the director of 1971's *Mecánica nacional*.

Alcoriza's self-acknowledged admiration for Luis Buñuel is evident in *Mecánica nacional*, which strongly resembles the Spanish director's 1962 *El ángel exterminador*. Buñuel's deconstruction of the rituals of bourgeois social interaction focuses on a group of upper-class people inexplicably trapped in a house for several days. As time passes and they become increasingly frustrated by this situation, formality and ritual are stripped away. The guests abandon their sophisticated decorum and instead indulge their real passions, which are far from civilised and often violent. The target of Buñuel's satire is the oppressively conformist nature of class-related social mores. Alcoriza, on the other hand, turns his attention to Mexico's newly created middle class. Unlike Buñuel's protagonists, his characters are relentlessly crude and lacking in decorum throughout the film. Instead of charting the decline in the characters' propriety, Alcoriza exposes the fissures in the relationships between the family at the centre

of his film. Like Buñuel, Alcoriza creates a space outside normal time and routine in which the family plays out its conflicts.

The narrative begins as a group of men paint a goal on a highway, which is revealed to be the finishing point for a coast-to-coast road race from Acapulco to Mexico to Veracruz. The scene shifts to a garage, bearing the sign “Sólo damos servicio a clientes muy machos.” As a stream of cars pulls up outside the garage, the family matriarch, Chabela, prepares a mountain of food with her mother-in-law, Doña Lolita. Doña Lolita’s spiteful nature and vulgarity are established from the outset, as she comments: “Y me contaron que a la hija de Chalita, la del güero, le salió panza de tanto ir al cine con el novio.” Chabela, instead of criticising her mother-in-law’s malicious gossiping, corrects her for confusing one daughter for another. At this point, Eufemio, Chabela’s husband and the owner of the garage, enters the kitchen, excitedly finishing the preparations for the family’s day out. They plan to spend the night near the finish line of the race, so that they will be in a good position to see the winner the next morning.

Even before they leave the house, Eufemio becomes involved in a pointless row with a truck driver who is delivering ice. He chastises him for being inefficient, then insults him personally, encouraged by the crowd assembled outside. Eufemio’s compadre, who is referred to only in terms of his relationship with his friend, arrives as the argument becomes more intense, and he immediately takes Eufemio’s side, threatening the deliveryman with his gun in an absurdly

disproportionate show of violence. The men then proceed to congratulate themselves on their victory and to examine the store of alcohol they are bringing to the finishing line. Meanwhile, the compadre's wife, Dora, who is Chabela's comadre, enters the house, where Doña Lolita angrily objects to being excluded from the outing in characteristically colourful language: "¡Pero ustedes son una bola de inconsecuentes! Para cuidar la casa, sí soy buena, y para criar estas malcriadas. Pero de que sale algo bonito, ¡ah! ¡Qué se quede con la gata, la pinche vieja!" Dora defends her right to be included, and the old woman thanks her warmly, saying that she is the only one who understands her. As Chabela takes Lolita upstairs to tidy her, she reveals her crass nature once again, however, asking Chabela "¿Quién es esa vieja metiche?" While the women make their final preparations, Eufemio shows his compadre two sports cars that look impressive but do not work. The group finally departs and enters a stream of slow-moving traffic, as hundreds of people go to the place where the race will end. This procession is marked by chaos and aggression, as the cars jostle for space and the drivers shout obscenities at each other. Other key characters are introduced at this stage, among them a couple dressed entirely in white driving a white sports car and a soldier, Gregorio, who is accompanied by his scantily clad mistress, Paloma.

After much contention, the motorists set up camp in a clearing near the finish line. Almost immediately, the white-clothed couple begin an extended feast, cutting slices off a leg of jamón serrano and gorging themselves on paella. These foods

clearly identify the couple as Spanish, a detail that is not insignificant, as Alcoriza points out in a 1976 interview:

You'll remember from that movie the pair of Spanish kids, very sportily dressed, who dedicate themselves relentlessly to eating. They are not gratuitous types, they represent the vestiges of the 'honorable Spanish colony,' which maintains its gastronomic patriotism no matter what.²⁴

The visual deterioration of this couple, whose appearance degenerates from pristine whiteness to filth as they engage in nonstop gluttony, is also a Buñuelian symbol of decadence and unrestrained appetite, which introduces the sensory indulgence of the other protagonists. Their feast is rivalled by that of Doña Lolita, who indulges in excessive eating and drinking from the moment she arrives until she passes out and is left to rest on the back seat of the family's car.

As the evening wears on, the family members divide into two groups. Eufemio, Chabela, Dora, the compadre and Doña Lolita mingle with people of their age, while Eufemio and Chabela's two daughters depart to a gathering in a wooded area of the camp, where young hippies dance around fires, drink and make love. This action is mirrored in the behaviour of the adults. The older daughter is seduced by Lalo, a layabout who defends his laziness by saying that he is a

²⁴ Beatriz Reyes Nevares, *The Mexican Cinema: Interviews with Thirteen Directors*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976), p. 63.

nonconformist and who persuades the girl to sleep with him by pretending to be interested in the social issues that she discusses at length.

Eufemio discovers the lovers as he attempts to liaise with Paloma, who is the object of much lustful attention from all the men, in the woods. Chabela, in turn, is drawn to a seemingly romantic widower who appeals to her sentimental nature by talking of his nocturnal loneliness and complimenting her dreadful drunken singing. The juxtaposition of mother and daughter reveals the predatory nature of the men, who will use whatever rhetoric they feel will persuade the women to give in to their desires. The relationship between Paloma and Gregorio unravels, as he becomes utterly inebriated and she flirts with a macho young biker called Apache. Gregorio has initially introduced Paloma as his wife, but when she spurns his drunken advances, he sits with a group of equally drunk men and tearfully admits the truth: “Mi esposa está durmiendo en su hogar, y con sus hijos, como una santa. Esta es una cualquiera, obliguesa de cabaret.” The narrative axis shifts from the violent recriminations of Gregorio and Eufemio to sorrow as Doña Lolita dies as a result of her gluttony. Her death is met by melodramatic mourning and further outbursts by Eufemio, who attacks his wife and daughter and banishes them from his mother’s side as unfit to mourn her.

The film’s most openly parodic scene takes place when a camera crew near the family hears about the death and decides to film the mourners. Disorder gives way to a staged portrayal of unity and devout mourning, as the television director

assembles the family and other members of the crowd around Doña Lolita's body, which has been decorated with a crown, a cross and flowers to resemble a saint. The director's instructions to the family, urging them to pray more fervently and to look lovingly at the corpse, create a deeply satirical picture of the Mexican family, which is keen to project a positive image of harmony regardless of its divisions. After the director departs, a woman leads the rosary, but the mourners soon lose interest when the television cameras are absent, and they slip away until only Eufemio and the devout woman who led the rosary remain. They too leave as the cars approach the finishing line, with the result that Doña Lolita is abandoned, surrounded by rubbish and attended only by a dog. The action comes full circle as the crowd travels back to the city, engaging again in hostile competition for space on the congested highway. A policeman offers to escort the family when he learns that they are transporting a body, and Eufemio comments with obvious pride: "Nunca pensaste que ibas a tener un entierro así, mamacita, como el de un ministro," again suggesting that the appearance of grandeur is more important than the family's actual decline into greed and lust.

The title of Alcoriza's film alone is enough to suggest that it is a searing examination of a Mexican society that has become increasingly urban and materialistic in a move away from its rural roots and traditions. It has been translated as "The Mexican Way,"²⁵ but a more literal translation captures the mechanical aspect, which suggests a development that may be superior

²⁵ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, ed., 1995, p. 249.

technologically but is hollow. This idea is skilfully elaborated by Alcoriza in the metaphor of the journey to the race's finishing line. This journey goes nowhere, as the motorists camp in a deserted, anonymous space outside the city and society. Despite Eufemio's constant references to progress, his own racing cars are shells that look impressive but do not work, while he himself, despite his illusions of modernisation, takes refuge in outdated macho behaviour, signalled by the sign at his garage, which proclaims that he only serves machos. Eufemio epitomises the ignorance and lack of spirituality of a new breed of Mexican obsessed with the trappings of modernity and dismissive of the past, as his exchange with a group of men at the camp suggests:

Eufemio: El arco colonial y las pirámides me importan madres.

Compadre: ¡Es cierto!

Eufemio: Nos han dado mucho más fama y prestigio Acapulco y Puerto Vallarta, con la Taylor, que todas las ruinas.

This reference to Elizabeth Taylor, whose filming of *The Night of the Iguana* led to the transformation of Puerto Vallarta into a Westernised tourist resort, is a telling indictment of Eufemio's perspective on Mexico. Dazzled by the glamour of modern resorts that have little Mexican character, he privileges them over the monuments that are testament to Mexico's advanced pre-Columbian past and independence. The casting of the roles is also indicative of the director's ironic disruption of audience expectations, as Carl J. Mora notes:

He employed a number of well-known performers in roles that were veritable antitheses of their popular images. Manolo Fábregas, grandson of the famed Virginia Fábregas, and one of Mexico's best-known actor-producer-directors, played the role of Eufemio, a crude, stupidly *macho* garage owner. The popular *ranchera* songstress Lucha Villa was Chabela, his equally crude wife, and the quintessential mother figure, Sara García, did a grotesque parody of her self as Eufemio's mother.²⁶

This casting against type is used to great comic effect, but it also intensifies viewer discomfort at the images of Mexico portrayed on the screen. The principal focus of the film's satire is the Mexican family. Initially, Eufemio, Chabela, their daughters and Doña Lolita are a picture of intergenerational harmony as they engage in preparations for the trip. The grandmother's outburst is the first indication that the traditional family roles will be overturned in the film. Her complaints about the work she does in the house are the antithesis of the abnegation of the idealised Mexican mother. Doña Lolita, instead of being fulfilled by her role as a grandmother, complains about the work she does and refuses to be relegated to the domestic sphere, expressing herself in foul-mouthed language. The reification of the mother still endures, nonetheless, even in the mind of Gregorio, who has tried to convince the crowd that the suggestively dressed, coquettish Paloma is his wife, as he praises his real wife for being like a saint. This glorification of mothers as saints is called into question by the behaviour of both Chabela and Doña Lolita, both of whom place their sensory appetites over the welfare of the family. Indeed, Charles Ramírez Berg argues

²⁶ Carl J. Mora, 1982, pp. 121-122.

that Sara García's role in this film signals the end of the cinematic representation of the perfect, self-sacrificing mother:

Mexican movie motherhood comes to old age and death without a shred of dignity. After Sara García's revisionist parody of her role as the Mother of Mexico in *Mecánica nacional*, it would be hard for audiences to take the long-suffering mother role à la García seriously ever again.²⁷

Not only does the film parody the conventional respectful portrayal of motherhood but it offers little hope for the new generations. Eufemio and Chabela are juxtaposed with the characters of Gregorio and Paloma. The fact that Paloma works in a cabaret evokes the *cabaretera* genre, which focused on morally compromised women, and suggests that Chabela, as a mother, should stand in contrast to her. Chabela is initially critical of Paloma's aggressively sexual appearance, but she soon reveals herself to be as susceptible to sensual temptation as Paloma. Neither does the generation represented by Lalo offer any possibilities for optimism about the future of Mexico. Lalo in particular appears to represent a new panorama free from conservative values and religion, but his chanting of slogans such as "Hay que hacer el amor, no la guerra" is revealed as empty rhetoric that allows him to shirk any responsibility and prey on as many women as possible. Behind its ribald humour, *Mecánica nacional* offers a deeply troubling picture of a Mexico embracing the signs of progress without advancing

²⁷ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 71.

in any meaningful way and abandoning much of what was positive in its history. As Mora pointedly observes:

Clearly no new Mexican revolution is possible from such as Eufemio or, even more tellingly, from the sybaritic young people of *Mecánica nacional*. Alcoriza seems to be saying that it was people such as these that looked unemotionally upon the Tlatelolco massacre and quickly shrugged it off. Fifty years of the official Revolution had succeeded admirably in depoliticizing an entire generation and convincing it that the consumer society was its inevitable destiny.²⁸

The family unity discernible among the protagonists of Jorge Fons's *Rojo amanecer* was shattered as a result of the political activism of the university going sons and its subsequent brutal oppression by state forces. In *Mecánica nacional*, there is no nobility in the actions of the characters, all of whom are solely concerned with satisfying their selfish desires. Moreover, Eufemio's absurd pride at his mother's burial, which could hardly be less dignified, suggests how little he and the others have learned from their conflicts and that they will continue to lack self-knowledge.

Jaime Humberto Hermsillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo* offers a radically different portrait of family life. Set in Guadalajara in the 1980s, it was the first openly gay Mexican film made. Its deceptively simple narrative follows the progress of the relationship between Rodolfo, a successful paediatric neurosurgeon and the son of the wealthy widow Doña

²⁸ Carl J. Mora, 1982, p. 123.

Herlinda, and Ramón, a working-class music student. In the opening scene, Rodolfo visits Ramón at his boarding house, where their efforts to make love are frustrated by constant interruptions, much to Rodolfo's annoyance. Ramón in turn is annoyed by Rodolfo's lack of pretence about their relationship when his neighbour calls. The visit comes to an end when Doña Herlinda telephones Ramón to tell them to hurry and to remember to collect Olga, the latest in a series of women she has introduced to her son. This conversation introduces the weekly outing of the widow, her son and her son's lover to the Lago Chapala outside the city, accompanied on this occasion by Olga. The group have lunch and drinks at an open-air restaurant, serenaded by mariachis and then a rock band. Ramón is abrupt and rude to Olga, whom he obviously views as a threat, and he becomes increasingly upset when she and Rodolfo dance. He asks another girl to dance, inspiring jealousy in Rodolfo. The couple meet the next day at Ramón's conservatory, where they argue about the events at the restaurant:

Ramón: Oye, yo no hice nada malo. ¿Acaso tú no bailaste con Olga?

Rodolfo: Sí, pero bien sabes que lo hago nada más para darle gusto a mi mamá.

Ramón: Yo lo hice nada más para divertirme. Para estirar las piernas. Y además porque me gusta bailar. Tú sabes perfectamente que me gusta bailar.

Rodolfo: ¿Y adónde quiere que lo lleve a bailar? Que yo sepa aquí en Guadalajara no hay ningún lugar.

This conversation establishes the central tensions in the film. The couple's affection for each other is not in doubt, but they face serious obstacles. They do not conform to the camp, effeminate gay types represented in countless Mexican films, such as Arturo Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites* (1977), in which Roberto

Cobo plays a transvestite madam in a provincial brothel. Rodolfo is a respected professional who has a great deal to lose if his sexual orientation is discovered and who is torn between satisfying his own desires and those of his lover and his mother. He attempts to reconcile the problem of privacy by bringing Ramón to live with him in his mother's home, with her full cooperation. In fact, it is she who suggests the arrangement, making it clear that the couple will stay in the same room, much to Ramón's surprise. The continuing need to resolve the gap between the wishes of the gay couple to be together and Doña Herlinda's longing to have grandchildren is underlined in the following scene, when they embrace in bed while she leafs through a bridal magazine as the camera cuts to a framed photograph of Rodolfo. Ramón's questioning about whether she realises the true nature of the relationship between him and her son is answered soon after, when she sees them kiss but tactfully ignores it. Doña Herlinda is more concerned with public reputation than the details of her son's private life.

Her collusion in his affair heightens when Ramón's parents come to visit. Ramón's mother is obviously suspicious about her son's relationship with Rodolfo, but she is reassured by what she sees of the family, especially when Olga is present to see them off at the airport. In a scene charged with irony, she comments to her son: "Bueno, hijo. Ahora sí me voy tranquila. Sabiendo que te quedas a vivir con esta familia se me ha quitado muchas mortificaciones." Her relief at meeting Doña Herlinda and Rodolfo suggests that she has little idea of the nature of the family in which her son lives. The unconventional relationship

between the three is subtly suggested in several scenes, particularly when the mother contentedly watches her son and Ramón in affectionate closeness. Even when Rodolfo goes to Olga's house to ask her hand in marriage and Ramón, who is extremely upset and confused, stays at home, Doña Herlinda takes pains to emphasise that their unique arrangement will remain the same: "Siéntete como en tu casa. Aunque no de sangre, somos tus verdaderos parientes." There is also no question that she hears her son promising his lover that the marriage will not bring an end to their relationship. In light of these circumstances, the priest's heavy-handed sermon on the importance of the nuclear family at Rodolfo and Olga's wedding seems absurd:

Esta es el único medio moral de fundar la familia, de conservar la especie y de suplir las imperfecciones del individuo, que no puede bastarse a sí mismo, para llegar a la perfección del género humano. Esto no existe en la persona sola, sino en la dualidad conyugal.

The fact that Ramón continues his relationship with Rodolfo and that he even develops a friendship with Olga contradicts the priest's confident pronouncement and suggests that other family models are not only possible but can be successful. Doña Herlinda further contributes to the maintenance of the complex triangular relationship in which her son is engaged by extending her home, so that all four of them will live there with Rodolfo and Olga's son. The concluding scene centres on another formal religious occasion, the christening of the child. In a subtle but striking visual image, Hermosillo has Olga and Ramón chat together in front of a

mirror. They wear almost the same clothing and hairstyles, so that they are virtually indistinguishable. This presentation of the characters is a reflection of their growing closeness but also of the similar role each plays in Rodolfo's life. This correspondence between them is further emphasised when Rodolfo remarks, looking at his child after Olga departs, "Es como si fuera de nosotros, ¿no?" In the final sequence of the film, Rodolfo recites a sentimental poem in praise of motherhood to the guests assembled at the house. In a tableau-like montage, Ramón and Olga are placed to one side of him, while his mother is seated on the other. His poem, which he first recited while naked in a sauna with Ramón, appears to be a conventional treatise on love:

Que hermoso hubiera sido vivir bajo aquel techo, los dos unidos siempre y amándonos los dos. Tú siempre enamorada, yo siempre satisfecho, los dos una sola alma, los dos un solo pecho. Y en medio de nosotros, mi madre como un dios.

In fact, the ambiguities in the genders of the people mentioned admit several different possibilities. The "los dos" mentioned in the first phrase could be either Rodolfo and Olga or Rodolfo and Ramón, with the second possibility being more likely because it echoes Ramón's earlier stated wish to live alone with Rodolfo. The reference to the "enamorada" is explicitly female and clearly refers to Olga, although it also suggests Rodolfo's need to dissimulate about the true nature of his relationship with Ramón. The conclusion of the poem points to Doña Herlinda's central role in facilitating the complex family structure that has been created by Rodolfo and his two lovers. Her rather fixed smile certainly reveals

her pleasure that the arrangement has been so successful, but it is also reminiscent of her smiling to Ramón's suspicious mother in a gesture that concealed her knowledge about the sexual relationship between the men.

It is to Hermosillo's credit that his light-hearted film is never didactic or obvious in its treatment of the complex relationships established. His intention is to present an alternative family structure, and in this he succeeds admirably, largely through clever ironies or light humour. It is surely no coincidence that Doña Herlinda, like Elena in *Como agua para chocolate*, is a widow. She is consequently free of patriarchal authority and can establish a family situation that is far from mainstream and that would not be acceptable to her husband. The key to understanding her attitude is to realise, as Carlos Monsiváis observes, that her actions are not as transgressive as they may appear in that she respects the outward appearance of propriety: “. . . la madre cómplice de Doña Herlinda y su hijo . . . no se opone a la “perversión” sino a la salida del clóset que es un enorme desventaja en sociedades cerradas.”²⁹ The importance of privacy in the film is also noted by David William Foster, who signals the options open to individuals even in a generally restrictive, conformist society:

Hermosillo's film is micropolitics at its best, the possibility of a gesture of resistance without having to wait for the totally revolutionary restructuring of society in order to make possible the fulfillment of personal needs. It is less a question of reinscribing the patriarchy than of living at cross-purposes to it, less a question of resigning oneself to

²⁹ Carlos Monsiváis, 1994, p. 215.

accepting the impositions of society (Rodolfo seems hardly displeased at becoming a father) than of availing oneself of the gaps or the contradictions in the system in order to construct dimensions of an alternate world.³⁰

The solutions offered to the particular problems involved in the triangular relationship at the heart of the film are not altogether satisfactory, however, in terms of Mexican social mores. The place of religion in the alternative family is the most notable contentious issue, for both the marriage and the christening underline the importance of the church's approval, although the moral flexibility displayed by both Rodolfo and his mother is explicitly at odds with church teaching. Ultimately, the film can be seen as a call for tolerance and compromise. All three participants in the triangular relationship satisfy their desires to some extent and learn to respect each other. Doña Herlinda, meanwhile, has fulfilled the demands of society for the continuance of the family line while maintaining the delicate balance that sustains the alternative family she has created.

Arturo Ripstein's cinematic exploration of the Mexican family could hardly be more different to Hermosillo's. Ripstein seeks to expose the grim reality behind the traditionally positive filmic image of the family, focusing his enquiry on characters at the margins of society and generally presenting the family in a sombre light, as Paulo Antonio Paranaguá acknowledges:

³⁰ David William Foster, 'Queering the Patriarchy in Hermosillo's *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*,' Anne Marie Stock, ed., 1997, pp. 241-242.

En *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo adopta el humor y las variaciones sobre el arquetipo de la madre (tan característico del cine mexicano) para mostrar que la tolerancia no lleva necesariamente al caos, mientras el pesimista Ripstein encuentra formas de intolerancia por todas partes, incluso dentro de uno mismo.³¹

Ripstein's *El castillo de la pureza* (1972) centred on a deranged patriarch, Gabriel Lima, who cannot comprehend the changes in society and so keeps his family imprisoned at home in an effort to keep them free of what he sees as nefarious influences. As is often the case in Ripstein's work, the father's extreme position masks his own hypocrisy, for outside the house he engages in the sensory pleasures he denies his family. The utter isolation of the family, encapsulated in what Ripstein terms the slogan of the film, "afuera es feo,"³² almost leads the older daughter and son to engage in incest. This conclusion is averted, however, both by the intervention of Lima and his family's eventual escape into the world outside. The pathology that results from the exaggerated parental authority embodied in Lima has its female counterpart in Coral, the disturbed mother who is one of the protagonists of the 1996 film *Profundo carmesí*.

Profundo carmesí both appropriates and overturns the traditions established by a wide range of cinematic traditions in its examination of the family. The film is loosely based on the American film *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969), directed by

³¹ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, *Arturo Ripstein: La espiral de la identidad*, (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1997), p. 133.

³² Emilio García Riera, *Arturo Ripstein habla de su cine*, (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1988), p. 103.

Leonard Kastle.³³ Kastle's gritty, documentary-like work, which was shot in black and white, is based on the true story of Martha Beck and Raymond Fernández, an obese nurse and a gigolo. The couple preyed on lonely women they met through advertisements in the personal columns of newspapers. Beck abandoned her children to be with her lover, who she believed resembled the actor Charles Boyer. They pretended to be brother and sister until they were captured and sent to the electric chair for murdering three of their victims. *The Honeymoon Killers* does not mention Beck's children, and there is only a fleeting reference to Charles Boyer. Ripstein, on the other hand, uses both these elements to great effect.

The couple, now called Coral Fabre and Nicolás Estrella, are first seen reflected in mirrors in their respective homes. Coral's image is seen in a broken mirror, lying in bed reading romantic magazines. She gets up, sits in front of the mirror, applies lipstick, writes Charles Boyer's name on her breast, then kisses a photograph of the actor attached to the dressing table. Nicolás is also seen reflected in a mirror, although he is preoccupied with his own image as he fixes his toupee. Mirror images are a key visual motif in Ripstein's work, and he has remarked that they fascinate him because they are not real but reflections that suggest the different traits of one's personality: "Je parle d'images qui sont des images, et non la réalité. Le miroir rend compte de cela et aussi de la duplicité,

³³ Hugo Lazcano, 'Profundo Carmesí,' *Reforma*, (September 13, 1996), p. 23.

des traits ambivalents de la personnalité.”³⁴ This idea of the unreality of the mirror image is emphasised particularly in the case of Coral. She emerges from her romantic reverie to deal with the mundane responsibilities of her life as a single mother, who must work as a nurse to support her two children, Carlos and Teresa. Her shortcomings as a mother become clear when Teresa witnesses her efforts to seduce a feeble old patient by exposing her breast and tells her to tie her uniform, muttering that she is a “gorda asquerosa.” This comment provokes the first of Coral’s angry outbursts at her daughter:

Coral: ¿Qué dijiste, cabrona? ¿Qué dijiste? Sí gorda, gorda por estar aquí cuidándolos, aquí encerrada . . . y báñate con tu hermano, porque estoy muy ocupada con Don Dimas.

Teresa: ¿Juntos?

Coral: Juntos.

Teresa: Los niños y las nenas no se bañan juntos.

Coral: En esta casa sí, porque es tarde, porque tienes una madre nerviosa, porque lo digo yo, la gorda.

The role reversal between Coral’s young daughter and her mother is extremely poignant, as the girl has a much clearer idea of acceptable behaviour than her mother, who reveals herself to be both malicious and immature. The impropriety of the children’s bathing together also alludes to the theme of incest, which will re-emerge in the relationship between Coral and Nicolás. Coral is not entirely heartless towards her children, despite her severity. After another row with her

³⁴ From an interview with Michel Ciment, ‘Des mondes fermés à la fois drôles et horribles,’ *Positif*, (No. 433, March 1997), p. 32.

daughter, who asks why they are not having supper, she is filled with remorse and begs the girl to forgive her, blessing her and hugging her in desperation. Coral is torn between her evident love for her children and her frustration at the limitations they place on her, especially in the pursuit of romance. When the children go to bed, she again retreats into her fantasies, as she replies to Nicolás's personal advertisement, which leads to their first meeting at her home.

Another significant scene involving mirrors takes place after they have spent the night together. Nicolás, who uses his resemblance to Charles Boyer to romance and exploit lonely women, realises that Coral has children and is as poor as he is, so he creeps out of bed naked, stealing from her purse as he goes. It is only when he leaves that the viewer realises that he has been seen from Coral's perspective. The camera pans from Nicolás, the fake Charles Boyer, to a photograph of the real Boyer, to Coral's reflection, so there is no doubt that she can see that Nicolás does not measure up to the image he cultivates. This does not discourage her in the slightest, however, and she seeks Nicolás out at home, bringing her children with her so that they can live together as a family. Turning Coral towards his mirror so that he can further emphasise his point by making her confront her image as a mother, Nicolás makes it clear that this is not a possibility. Coral pleads with him to let them stay, but he firmly refuses, using the argument that he could not allow her to support him, as she suggests, nor raise another man's children because to do so would be to injure his Spanish pride.

What he does not foresee is that Coral is so desperate for romance that in the following sequence, she takes her children to an orphanage so that he will no longer have a reason to reject her. Up to this point, *Profundo carmesí* has combined elements of melodrama with black humour. Coral's abandonment of her children is a wicked parody of the saintly, self-sacrificing mothers of Mexican melodramas of the so-called golden age, the period in which the film is set. Coral comforts her distraught daughter, assuring her that it is for the best and showing her a letter in which she asks for them to be kept together. She counsels Teresa to be brave and to forget her. This noble mood is shattered when the girl attempts to follow her, sobbing wildly, and Coral shouts: "¡Dije valiente, carajo!" This scene evokes another staple in the Mexican tradition of melodrama, the melodrama of sinners, which Édgar Soberón Torchia describes as follows:

Género popular, perdurable y de arraigo en tradiciones mexicanas, el melodrama de pecadores, casi por regla, presentaba a una joven provinciana que perdía la virginidad, era abandonada por su seductor y se convertía en prostituta.³⁵

Although Coral's situation does not conform precisely to this model, she is convinced that the only way to keep Nicolás, having slept with him and been rejected, is to abandon her most precious possession, her children. Ironically, when the couple do cement their relationship, it is Nicolás who sells his charms to support them.

³⁵ Édgar Soberón Torchia, 1995, p. 157.

Nicolás returns home to find that Coral has discovered that he murdered his previous wife and that he takes advantage of lonely women, but even this does not deter her. Although his initial reaction to her insistence on staying with him is one of horror, he gradually reveals his own disturbed mental state as he comes to see Coral's abandonment of her children as a noble, romantic act. The pair decide to pose as brother and sister to add respectability to his courting of women, and Coral undertakes to choose the candidates. From this point on, the film could be said to resemble a road movie with elements of *film noir*, as they travel the country in search of rich, lonely women.

Until relatively near the film's conclusion, the humorous elements persist. The couple's first victim is a vulgar drunk who is even less sympathetic than the charmless Coral, and her death by poisoning is not particularly gory. The second woman to die at their hands is a hypocrite whose religious devotion hides a lascivious nature. Her murder, which involves Coral beating her to death with instruments including a giant statue of the Virgin Mary, is as darkly humorous as it is disturbing. The tone changes abruptly when the pair encounter their final victim, however.

Until they meet the young widow Rebeca Sampedro and her toddler Mercedes, Coral and Nicolás seem largely untroubled by their murders, although their relationship is not without conflict. The tensions between them almost always stem from Nicolás's obsessive attempts to conceal his baldness with his wig and

his deep shame about this flaw in his appearance. Their first real argument occurs when he takes his frustration out on Coral after his wig is ruined. Harmony is restored when he finds that Coral has used her own hair to mend the wig. This act signals a weirdly maternal element in their relationship, which already had tones of pseudo-incest because their sexual union belied their pretence of being siblings. In fact, it is Rebeca's awakening of the deepest insecurities of the protagonists that leads to the deaths of herself and her daughter and marks the movement in the film from dark comedy to tragedy.

Coral and Rebeca dislike each other almost instantly, and Coral is bitterly jealous of Mercedes and the attention Nicolás pays to her. When the couple meet furtively one night, she is unable to contain herself:

Coral: ¿Por qué juegas con la niña?

Nicolás: Por Dios. Juego porque juego, porque así me gano la madre, porque es una cría simpática.

Coral: Y los míos, ¿qué? ¿Y mis hijos qué? Mis hijos eran más simpáticos que la monigota esa. Mis hijos eran cariñosos y simpáticos. Tú los echaste. Me obligaste a echarlos de mi vida.

Nicolás: ¿Yo?

Coral: Tú, tú me hiciste elegir. En cambio a ella, no le dices que deje a la niña.

Coral's accusations reveal her continued guilt at having abandoned her children, which is vividly brought back to her by the presence of Mercedes, whom she tries to befriend but only succeeds in frightening. After Rebeca finds Coral forcing the

child to eat, she insists that she leave. Coral's guilt is equalled by Nicolás's obsession with his appearance, however, and when Rebeca teases him about the wig, he reacts with extreme physical violence. His action ends their apparently happy relationship, and he sends for Coral, who learns that Rebeca is pregnant and wants to abort the child. Nicolás has broken his promise of sexual fidelity to Coral, and he begs her to punish him by crushing him like an insect. Her fury is instead directed towards the wig, which symbolises her maternal power over Nicolás, as Paranaguá affirms:

El fetichismo del bisoñé por parte de nuestro Don Juan anticipa una regresión a los confines del infantilismo, cuando se somete a la humillación de la madre severa, la madre capaz de castigar a los hijos, al punto de abandonarlos, de privarlos de su presencia y afecto.³⁶

What follows is a deeply disturbing sequence in which Coral, under pretence of helping Rebeca, tries to kill her, an act completed by Nicolás, who also seeks to save Coral the pain of killing Mercedes. Coral insists on taking charge, however, saying "Ahora yo soy su mamá, ¿no? Me toca." This chilling perversion of maternal responsibility leads even Nicolás to realise that the couple cannot continue their murderous journey, and he turns them in. As Marvin D'Lugo points out, it is this emphasis on Coral's maternal qualities that saves her from being a villain, nonetheless:

³⁶ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1997, p. 287.

Ultimately, it is this Oedipal narrative that redeems the grifters' farce as tragedy. The maternity that Coral struggles to avoid but which, through a series of ironic twists of fate, she is forced to accept, seems to transform her from one more of Ripstein's self-deceived loners into a figure of truly tragic dimensions.³⁷

The closing image of Nicolás and Coral, who have been shot by the police and lie reflected in a pool of water and their own blood, is a culmination of the mirror images throughout. No longer separate, their reflection has become one image in the film's bleak finale.

Ripstein's appropriation of the filmic genres of melodrama, the road movie, elements of *film noir* and the star system represented by Boyer amounts to a critique not just of false cinematic portrayals of the family but of Mexican society in general. He cleverly exposes the less savoury aspects of both gender and familial roles obscured by the romanticism of many golden age films. Coral's dysfunctional motherhood, which reveals the traumas of single mothers lacking in both emotional and financial support and desperate for an escape from the hardships of reality, recasts the maternal stereotypes of Mexican film, moreover. *Profundo carmesí's* nihilistic conclusion makes Alcoriza's satire seem mild in comparison. Hermosillo's is by far the most optimistic reflection on the Mexican family, but even his film proposes radical departures from traditional models. Overall, the innovation and lack of conformity evident in each film point to new ways of imagining the family and new possibilities for society.

³⁷ Marvin D'Lugo, 'Deep Crimson,' *Film Quarterly*, (Vol. 52, No. 4, summer 1999), p. 35.

The Crossing: Mexican Emigration to the North.

Mexican author Juan Rulfo's short story "Paso del Norte" provides a penetrating insight into the circumstances surrounding the emigration of Mexicans to the United States. The narrative begins as the unnamed protagonist tells his father that his financial situation is so desperate that he has no alternative but to leave his family and find work in the North, spurred on by the success of another man in the rural village:

- Y ¿qué diablos vas a hacer al Norte?
- Pos a ganar dinero. Ya ve usted, el Carmelo volvió rico, trajo hasta un gramófono y cobra la música a cinco centavos. De a parejo, desde un danzón hasta la Anderson ésa que canta canciones tristes; de a todo por igual, y gana su buen dinerito y hasta hacen cola para oír. Así que usted ve; no hay más que ir y volver. Por eso me voy.¹

Rulfo conveys a great deal about the community he portrays in a few deceptively straightforward sentences. The protagonist is an innocent who, dazzled by his neighbour's good fortune, does not realise the complications involved in journeying to the United States. What is more, his descriptions of the fervour for Carmelo's music, and even his father's occupation as a vendor of party favours, unwittingly reveal much about village life. Although the protagonist and his family are on the brink of starvation, his father is extremely reluctant to help him organise his journey and relents only when he is promised payment. Meanwhile, the villagers clamour to pay for frivolous amusements.

¹ Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo y El llano en llamas*, (Barcelona: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1999), p. 191.

The journey to the North is an utter disaster. The protagonist and his companions are intercepted at the border, and he is forced to return home with little money to show for his efforts. Worse still, his wife has left him and their children for a muleteer, and his father has sold his house to recover the money his son owed him for keeping his children. Rulfo depicts a harsh environment in which there is little solidarity and each person must struggle for survival. For the protagonist, going to the United States seemed to be a simple solution to his poverty, but he returns to find that his life has been destroyed in his absence by his wife's abandonment and his father's materialism and lack of compassion.

What is most noteworthy about this bleak picture of a Mexican's difficult choice between grinding poverty and the risky option of emigrating is its contemporary relevance, despite the fact that Rulfo was writing in 1953. A strikingly similar scenario is played out in Jorge Fons's 1994 film *El callejón de los milagros*. Although the action is transposed to Mexico City in present-day times, the portrayal of emigration is markedly like that in Rulfo's story. Two of the main characters in the film, Chava and Abel, young men who hold down dead-end jobs and dream of a better life, debate the merits of going to the United States. Abel is reluctant, as he has at last persuaded a beautiful local girl called Alma to let him court her. Chava, who has always been more eager to leave than his friend, is eventually forced to flee when he brutally attacks his father's gay lover. Fearing the consequences, he goes to the North, accompanied by Abel, who leaves both because of his loyalty to Chava and his realisation that he will need a great deal of money to support the spoiled, avaricious Alma. Abel returns after some time, having

communicated sporadically with Alma, to find that the world he left behind has changed irreparably. Notwithstanding her commitment to Abel, Alma faced great pressure from those around her to marry. Confused and alone, she is swayed by a handsome charmer who is revealed to be a pimp at a luxurious brothel, where she becomes a prostitute.

Abel's discovery that Alma, for whom he toiled in misery, has sold herself in his absence triggers off a chain of events that culminate in his death. The circumstances of the film are undoubtedly different to those of Rulfo's story, for the *mise en scène* presents a tough urban environment in the 1990s rather than a harsh rural atmosphere in the 1950s.

Nonetheless, the parallels between the experiences of the emigrants are clear. Abel may have had more success than Rulfo's protagonist in economic terms, but he too is deceived by his beloved and finds that his sacrifice has been for nothing. Above all, the reasons for the men's departure have remained the same. Even after a gap of 40 years, it seems that Mexicans have little choice but to emigrate if they are to realise their dreams of living comfortably, although their real desire is to remain in their country and build a life there.

The voluminous discussion of emigration from Mexico to the United States is notable for its concentration on North America's attitudes to its southern neighbour. Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero confirms that the study of the interaction between the two nations has resulted in a prodigious amount of cross-cultural psychological enquiry:

... Estados Unidos de América y México no son sólo copropietarios de una de las más extensas fronteras que existen entre dos tan diferentes, si bien compatibles, socioculturales, sino que no

existe ningún otro par de naciones sobre la Tierra en donde hayan realizado un mayor número de estudios psicológicos *comparativos*.²

As if to prove his point, the book containing this statement features no less than five separate studies on Mexican-American cultural disparities. Little attention is paid, on the other hand, in both Díaz-Guerrero's volume and in many other such works, to Mexican opinions on their peers' emigration to the United States. A significant reason for this oversight of Mexican views on emigration is the fervent nationalism that has characterised the country since Independence, which has led emigration to be encoded in profoundly negative terms. In the wake of Independence, Mexicans strove to create a national culture that would inspire pride and patriotism in their fellow countrymen, thus bolstering the legitimacy of a Mexican identity. One example of this tendency is found in the work of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, a leading light in the literary scene of the mid to late 1800s who founded the journal *El Renacimiento* in 1869.³ Altamirano wasted no opportunity in exhorting his fellow writers to create a truly national literature, as José Luis Martínez points out:

Desde su primera hasta su última página, *El Renacimiento* fue un semillero de temas, doctrinas y conquistas culturales en los que se reconoce la mano inspiradora de Altamirano. Mas el tema que con mayor constancia e interés llenó las páginas del semanario fue el de la cultural nacional.⁴

² Rogelio Díaz-Guerrero, 1999, p. 135.

³ José Luis Martínez, 'México en busca de su expresión,' *Historia general de Mexico*, 1998, p. 1048.

⁴ José Luis Martínez, *Historia general de Mexico*, 1998, p. 1049.

Altamirano's call for a national literature was laudable for its inclusiveness — he stressed to need to create a body of work accessible to all and saw education and culture as a way forward for the Mexican people. He was also open to the incorporation of regional idioms and dialects into this new literature, in order that it would not be elitist.⁵ His stance suggests a privileging of the native over the foreign in an effort to overturn both the dominance of American influence and the Eurocentric attitudes that had prevailed up to this time. The danger in such an approach to culture is that it can create a polarity between one's native land and other countries, and this has certainly been the case all too often in Mexico's relations with the United States. If the national is the supreme embodiment of culture, then the passage to the North must necessarily be seen as a movement away from one's nation that is perceived as a profound loss. This view is further complicated by the uncomfortable realities that Mexico faced at the turn of the century, which often called into question the high regard for the national and underlined the need for emigration. Ultimately, Mexican resentment towards the United States is necessarily tempered by the need to acknowledge the importance of emigration as a safety valve to Mexico, where low wages and high unemployment have traditionally militated against the achievement of a reasonable standard of living for many.

In his overview of emigration from Mexico to the United States in the 1920s, which represented the first great wave of movement to the North, Jorge Durand provides a succinct summary of the complex web of interacting factors that drive Mexicans to leave their homeland:

⁵ José Luis Martínez, *Historia general de Mexico*, 1998, p. 1056.

La conjugación de una serie de factores económicos y sociopolíticos, tanto de aquí como de allá, impulsaron la migración internacional como una alternativa de trabajo viable para los campesinos de la región occidental del país en las primeras décadas del siglo: la conexión ferroviaria entre México y Estados Unidos, la Revolución de 1910, la demanda norteamericana de trabajadores mexicanos durante la primera guerra mundial, el desarrollo económico de la posguerra en Estados Unidos, las dificultades de la etapa de reconstrucción nacional que vivía México después de la Revolución y la revuelta cristera.⁶

The observations compiled by Durand, written by commentators in the early 20th century, suggest that despite the fact that emigration provided a means of survival for countless Mexicans living in abject poverty and political turmoil, the nationalistic attitude that emigration could not possibly be a desirable option for Mexicans persisted. Alfonso Fabila's 1928 essay is a dramatic articulation of the inherent love of his country that makes the Mexican incapable of desiring to leave his native land permanently to create a new home in the United States:

¿Que el mexicano no quiere regresar? ¡Mentira! Error que yo mismo he asentado cuando no conocía la vida real del trabajador mexicano en Estados Unidos, sino lo que me contaban o leía. ¿Las comodidades?: casa con vidrios en las ventanas, estufa de gas en la cocina, zapatos para los hijos, que en México fueron descalzos. Puerilidades, tonteras que nada significan junto a la desnudez de un dolor de no tener nombre. El mexicano quiere y ansía a la patria, en el instante mismo en que va a cruzar la frontera, donde recibe el sofrenazo con que tropieza al habérselas

⁶ Jorge Durand, ed., *Migración México-Estados Unidos. Años veinte*, (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1991), p. 10.

con las autoridades aduanales. Examen detenido, riguroso: preguntas no sólo molestas, sino difíciles a esos hombres, la mayor de las veces analfabetos.⁷

Notwithstanding his rather bombastic tone, Fabila touches on some key issues that have made the Mexican view of emigration so ambivalent. Although he glosses over the material benefits of the move to the North rather too lightly, given that economic necessity was the primary reason for the uprooting of the bulk of emigrants in the early years of the 20th century, his analysis of the type of Mexican who emigrated is revealing. Generally from the poorer echelons of society, these Mexicans were ill-educated or unlettered. Adrift in an alien culture in which they frequently endured racism and exploitation, it is little wonder that such emigrants longed for home. Nor is it surprising that emigration was frequently a temporary measure and that many Mexicans could not conceive of making their home in a country so hostile to their presence.

The conflict that characterises Mexican discourse on emigration finds its most extreme expression in the discussion of the Mexican-American, almost invariably referred to by the derogative title of the *pachuco*. As a consequence of the negative attitudes to emigration on the part of Mexicans, the *pachuco* is viewed with suspicion if not outright contempt. In an essay written in 1930, Enrique Santibáñez outlines the tensions between Mexicans and Chicanos, concentrating on the perceived sense of superiority felt by the latter towards their peers:

⁷ Alfonso Fabila, 'El problema de la emigración de obreros y campesinos mexicanos,' Jorge Durand, ed., 1991, p. 39.

Su conocimiento del inglés les da naturalmente una gran superioridad sobre el mexicano que, con rarísimas excepciones, lo ignora. Esta superioridad le sirve para procurarse trabajos permanentes y mejor retribuidos aunque no en una notable proporción. Algunos viven muy envanecidos de esa superioridad y de que son ciudadanos americanos. Yo creo que más lo demuestran que lo sienten. Con esa actitud, naturalmente hieren a su hermano de raza y ocasionan divisiones dentro de la común familia que no sirven más que para prejuicio mutuo. El mexicano-americano no entra en los círculos del americano de raza blanca, pues tropieza con lo mismo que él tiene la torpeza de mostrar. Si él se envanece de ser americano y hablar inglés sufre el envanecimiento del blanco que le impone su color.⁸

Santibáñez's description of the Mexican-American strongly suggests the loathing that the community inspires in him. With scarcely contained glee, he points out that the sense of superiority felt by some Mexican-Americans towards Mexicans is untenable, for white Americans demonstrate the same supercilious attitude towards Mexican-Americans. The writer's sympathies lie squarely with the Mexicans, and he makes no effort to understand the complex reality of Mexican-Americans, who are caught between two worlds, instead likening them to a "larva" that has yet to develop into a complete being. His distance from the Mexican-American community is paralleled by Octavio Paz's writings on it some two decades later. Paz similarly approaches his subject from the outside, largely limiting his discourse to the distinctive appearance and behaviour of zoot suiters. He comments on their extravagant dress and hybrid language, noting insinuatingly that the very name *pachuco* is meaningless. In an extraordinarily dismissive introduction to the

⁸ Enrique Santibáñez, 'Ensayo acerca de la inmigración mexicana en Estados Unidos,' J. Durand, ed., 1991, p. 115.

pachuco, Paz acknowledges that his desire to differentiate himself from American society must be the result of some trauma, but says that he will not concern himself with this:

“No importa conocer las causas de este conflicto y menos saber si tiene remedio o no.”⁹

Like Santibáñez, Paz appears to suggest that the *pachuco* is defined more by what is he not and what he opposes than by any positive affirmation of what he is:

Por caminos secretos y arriesgados el “pachuco” intenta ingresar a la sociedad norteamericana. Mas él mismo se veda el acceso. Desprendido de su cultura tradicional, el pachuco se afirma un instante como soledad y reto. Niega a la sociedad de que procede y a la norteamericana.¹⁰

Paz’s analysis also suggests that the energies of the Mexican-American are far more concerned with addressing American society than with his Mexican roots, which he denies. Although Paz makes the important point that the very resistance to conformity displayed by the Mexican-American impedes his entry to American society, he appears to believe that the Mexican-American nonetheless aspires to belong to American society, while he gives little thought to Mexico. Paz also infers that there is something picturesque and absurd about the *pachuco*, who remains suspended between cultures without a solid identity of his own. There may well be elements of truth in this assessment, but it is strikingly uninvolved on the part of Paz, who admits to making no effort to understand the peculiar dilemmas faced by Mexican-Americans and instead comments rather disparagingly on what he sees as their cultural emptiness.

⁹ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 14.

¹⁰ Octavio Paz, 1981, p. 16.

Antagonistic attitudes towards the Mexican-American have persisted in the minds of many Mexicans, while the divisiveness associated with emigration has only intensified, partly because, as David J. Weber notes, Mexicans and Americans want very different things from it:

From the perspective of TV, radio, and the print media, the U.S.-Mexico border has become a zone of bitter conflict in the mid-1990s. The United States government, responding to the widespread belief that growing numbers of immigrants from Mexico threaten the economic well-being of United States citizens and undermine their shared values, has tried to slow the flow of undocumented immigrants by raising physical and psychological barriers across the border. Mexico, in need of foreign exchange for its troubled economy and a safety valve for acute unemployment and underemployment of its citizens, has pushed the United States to adopt a less restrictive border policy and had worked to promote better treatment of its nationals in the United States.¹¹

The conflict evident in Mexican attitudes towards the border is reflected not only in contemporary political relations but in filmic explorations of Mexicans' journey to the North. The particular antagonism demonstrated towards the Mexican-American is a salient feature of Mexican cinema, especially in the figure of Germán Valdés, whose stage name was Tin Tan. He was the only comedian to rival the enormously successful Cantinflas, whose class-conscious comedy led him to be described as "an urban tramp, the Aztec equivalent of Chaplin's."¹² Tin Tan created a *pachuco* character who wore an extravagant zoot suit and a beaming smile. Initially, the humour in his act derived from

¹¹ David, J. Weber, 'Conflicts and Accommodations: Hispanic and Anglo-American Borders in Historical Perspective, 1670-1853,' *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol.39, No.1, spring 1997, p. 1.

¹² Rafael Medina De la Serna, 'Sorrows and Glories of Comedy,' Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1995, p. 167.

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 ill feeling of Mexicans towards Mexican-Americans, even the fictitious one created by Tin Tan, led him to change his character, as Carl J. Mora notes:

Residents of central Mexico have tended to disdain northerners as being uncultured, boorish, and perhaps worst of all, semi-Americanized. This attitude increases in intensity when applied to Mexican-Americans. Therefore, although Tin-Tan's pachuco routine was initially accepted for its novelty, he was eventually obliged to change the character, making it into that of a street-wise native of the Federal District.¹³

His greatest success was in 1949's *El rey del barrio*, a film in which he played a Mexican slum dweller rather than a *pachuco*,¹⁴ no doubt benefiting from Mexicans' more favourable reception of a Mexican character, however humble.

Apart from the *pachuco*, the most obvious constant in Mexican films focusing on cross-cultural interaction is an almost obsessively anti-emigration bias. The deep ambivalence towards America, on which Mexico is forced to depend despite the often demeaning treatment afforded to its citizens there, combined with the reluctance to accept that Mexico's relative underdevelopment was a key factor to take into account. The inevitable result was the production of films that had a strong didactic message, warning against the evils and dangers of emigration. Americans were routinely presented as racist exploiters of innocent Mexicans, while the isolation and desperation of Mexicans

¹³ Carl J. Mora, 1982, p. 82.

¹⁴ Rafael Medina de la Serna, Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1991, p. 167.

separated from their homeland was vividly evoked. Rarely do these films focus on the positive aspects of emigration or the new opportunities open to fortunate emigrants, as Charles Ramírez Berg comments:

Crossing to the United States makes Mexican migrants strangers in a hostile land that alienates, humiliates and exploits them. Films about migratory passages emphasize this, painting the city, the border, and the United States as fraught with danger for migratory Mexicans.¹⁵

Perhaps the most explicitly anti-emigration film to be made in Mexico is Alejandro Galindo's 1953 *Espaldas mojadas*. Galindo filters his didactic message through the fictional story of a Mexican illegal emigrant, Rafael Amendolo Campusano. The film begins with an unambiguously worded "Advertencia Importante," which notes that the film is an amalgam of real and fictional events with a clearly stated aim:

Nuestro propósito es advertir a nuestros connacionales de la inconveniencia de tratar de abandonar al país en forma ilegal, con el riesgo de sufrir situaciones molestas y dolorosas que podían hasta crear dificultades en las buenas relaciones que venturosamente existen entre ambos pueblos.

Galindo expands on this message by demonstrating both the misery that results from leaving one's country and the difficult situations endured by illegal emigrants, while hinting at the diplomatic consequences of illegal emigration in a short scene involving the Mexican consul. The opening sequence of the film establishes both the physical and

¹⁵ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, p. 191.

psychological distance between Mexico and the United States. A positive image is given of the border town of Ciudad Juárez, as the camera pans from houses, trees and cars to a busy street, while the accompanying narration assures the viewer that work has replaced vice as the town's mainstay, although this proves not to be the case. El Paso is introduced in a similar fashion, but the bias towards Mexico is evident in even a superficially neutral statement of fact about the differences between the towns:

De este lado es México, donde todavía se habla en español y se canta a la Virgen con guitarras.

Allá, al otro lado, los rascacielos, símbolo arquitectónico del país más poderoso del mundo, donde todos sus habitantes tienen automóvil, radio y televisión.

This comparison between the American and Mexican border towns both acknowledges the superiority of the United States and tacitly calls it into question. America may have power, architectural superiority and material goods, but Mexico has its own language and the joy and spirituality represented by the singing to the Virgin.

These tensions and contradictions are experienced first hand by Rafael, whose progress the film follows. Having failed to enter the United States legally because of his lack of papers, he is forced to turn to a coyote, Frank Mendoza, who operates from a back room in a rowdy bar called Jim's Café. Although this bar combines the functions of a brothel with those of the coyote, its clientele nonetheless indulge in sentimental celebrations of Mexico. Despite the incongruity of their homage to a country that has failed them and forced them to leave it, they enthusiastically toast their homeland in drinking and in song. Again anti-American feeling is evident, as one of the musicians utters an exclamation that

denigrates the United States by corrupting a familiar comment on the relations between the nations: “Pobre de México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los estados hundidos.”

Mendoza arranges for Rafael to wade across the Río Bravo at night with a group of other Mexican men, but they are spotted from a watchtower by American guards, who open fire. In one of the film’s most poignant scenes, Rafael goes to the aid of a fatally wounded man, who begs him to throw him into the river so that his body will float to Mexico. After this, the film becomes a rather fragmented narrative that traces Rafael’s hardship and increasing disillusionment with the United States. He takes on a series of menial jobs, all of which are poorly paid. When he flees from one such job when his employer demands papers, an innovative montage of shots captures his terror and paranoia at the prospect of being caught by the police. A series of imaginary police hound him for his papers while sirens wail. His most longstanding employment is with Mr. Sterling, a corrupt American who conspires with Mendoza to bring illegal workers to America so that he can exploit them both by working them hard and charging them extortionate prices for goods at his store. The frequent images of the naked backs of the workers, drenched in sweat, both recall the film’s title and suggest the dehumanisation of these men, whose only value is their labour.

The film’s most affective scene takes place at the railway labour camp run by Sterling. The men rest in their makeshift tents or under the train at the end of a hard day, as one of their number sings “Tierra del Sol.” The choice of this song could not be more appropriate. It recalls the classic filmic celebration of Mexico, *Allá en el Rancho*

Grande, in which the heroine, Cruz, sings its opening lyrics: “Que lejos estoy del suelo donde yo he nacido/Inmensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento.” Cruz sings this song in her home, accompanied on the guitar by her step-father and courted by José Francisco, who she will eventually marry. In this cosy domestic setting, the song functions merely to showcase Cruz’s singing and to highlight the Mexican cultural richness so emphasised in the film. The song takes on an entirely different resonance in *Espaldas mojadas*, however. Its words provide a moving commentary on the plight of the men, who are lonely, desperate and far from home. This significance is further accentuated as the camera pans through the squalor in which the men live as it is sung.

Following a serious dispute with Sterling, Rafael leaves the job, unaware that he has wrongfully been accused of stealing by his former employer. This conflict culminates in Rafael’s meeting with Sterling in Jim’s Café, where the tables are turned and Rafael insults and beats Sterling, then decides to make him swim across the river, a move that leads to Sterling’s death, ironically at the hands of American border patrol guards. This conclusion to the antagonistic relationship between the men, as well as Rafael’s inability to revel in the death of his exploiter, suggests a chain of oppression and vengeance in which there are no victors.

Two other significant characters in Rafael’s odyssey are Luis Villarreal, a hobo who emerges at key points in the narrative and provides some much-needed friendship to Rafael, and a Chicana woman called María del Consuelo. The pair initially meet briefly soon after Rafael’s arrival and reunite when he visits the diner where she works. The

back motif emerges once more as she delivers a pitiful reflection on the difficulties faced by the Chicano, which cause her so much shame that she cannot face Rafael:

. . . Nuestra desgracia no es grande que la de un negro, aunque ellos nacieron aquí como nosotros. En cambio, no saben de donde vinieron, ni tienen idea de la tentación de huir a la patria. Además, ellos se defienden, hacen grupos, tienen sus bailes, sus cantos. Entre ellos se casan y se consuelan. En cambio nosotros, a nosotros la raza no nos quiere. Y los bolillos, ya viste. Te quieren para dos meses.

Rafael's response to her plight is rather unfeeling, as he does not suggest that she should be proud of her heritage but rather that no one in Mexico would notice that she is a *pocha*. This does not deter her from agreeing to marry him and going with him to Mexico, however. A final obstacle to their happiness lies in Rafael's detention by the Mexican police as he tries to cross the border back home. The police interrogate him, suspicious that he is not a Mexican national, and Rafael delivers his key speech, in which he acknowledges the hardships of life in Mexico but pronounces his love for his country in such a convincing manner that they are moved and release him. Rafael reunites with María, and even the cynical Luis is persuaded by Rafael's entreaties to return home.

Espaldas mojadas remains a brave attempt at documenting the suffering and challenges involved in illegal emigration. Although occasionally bombastic, it is a thoughtful attempt to portray events that are a central but overlooked part of Mexican life, as García Riera acknowledges, noting that the film was considered so controversial that it was

censored for two years before finally being screened.¹⁶ Mora similarly pays tribute to the film's powerful portrayal of emigration:

Galindo took on the entire gamut of social and economic problems besetting Mexico and even dedicated considerable attention to the status of Mexican-Americans. The realism of the film was heightened by Galindo's use of American actors speaking English dialogue. The problem of Mexican illegal emigration has perhaps never been set forth so well, although at times a mite sensationally, in a commercial film.¹⁷

One important qualification of this celebration of the film is the ambiguity of its conclusion. The decision to return to Mexico appears to contradict the idea of the necessity that impels Mexicans to run such risks to cross illegally into Mexico. What is more, there is little reason to expect that Rafael will fare better in Mexico this time than he has in the past, especially now that he must support María. Despite this reservation, *Espaldas mojadas* is undoubtedly a moving and hard-hitting examination of the motives for and consequences of emigration.

Arturo Ripstein's 1979 *La ilegal*, on the other hand, is a rather lurid, sensational account of one woman's experience of emigration. It stars the popular soap opera actress Lucía Méndez as Claudia Bernal, a naïve young woman who journeys to the United States. The opening shot features huge electric pylons, a bridge and a highway on which a patrol car travels. This car takes Claudia to prison, where she is formally accused of being an

¹⁶ Emilio García Riera, 1998, p. 197.

¹⁷ Carl J. Mora, 1982, p. 88.

illegal and engaging in prostitution. She shares her story with her cell mate, Carmen, in a scene that leads to the flashback that charts her traumatic experiences in the United States.

Claudia is introduced as she steps from an aeroplane heavily pregnant. She is greeted by her older married lover, Felipe, a Mexican who resides in the United States. Claudia believes that Felipe will divorce his wife to marry her, but after he installs her in a seaside apartment, she faces the first in a long series of disappointments. When she expresses her desire to marry before their child is born, Felipe tells her that this is impossible, since his wife refuses to grant him a divorce. Unable to call Felipe when she goes into labour, Claudia gives birth alone, but after this their relationship seems to flourish, as Felipe is seen on the beach beneath the house playing delightedly with his child. Their happiness is short-lived, however, as Felipe's wife Elena visits Claudia and confronts her about her affair with her husband. Claudia refuses to leave Felipe, while his wife learns that not only are her suspicions of her husband's infidelity correct but that the pair have a child. Elena is one of the few people in the film who fulfils her promises, for as she leaves the apartment, she threatens Claudia saying "Yo estoy dispuesta a todo."

This meeting unleashes a chain of events that lead Claudia into progressively more humiliating situations. Elena arranges for thugs to drug and rape Claudia and film their actions, so that she can persuade her husband that she is a prostitute. Felipe believes that Claudia has betrayed him, and she is denounced as an illegal and a prostitute, losing her child in the process. Gabriel Ramírez, who works for the Mexican consul, offers Claudia

some consolation when he visits her in prison. He believes that the charges against her will be dropped, but she will be deported. Claudia is horrified by this news and explains that she is innocent of both charges, as her lover had assured her that her expired papers would be renewed after they married, while her apparent engagement in prostitution was not what it seemed. She begs Gabriel to seek out Felipe, certain that he will still have faith in her, but Felipe refuses to accept her innocence and gains custody of their child, while Claudia is deported.

The remainder of the film follows the typical pattern of an emigrant's experience in the United States. Claudia is reduced to seeking out a coyote to help her cross. This she does with a group of other illegals, hidden under bales of hay on the back of a truck. Having arrived in the United States, Claudia goes to work in a sleazy bar owned by Don Tony, whose conditions of work are indicative of the exploitative treatment illegal emigrants are forced to accept: "Aquí se trabaja desde las seis de la tarde hasta la madrugada. Te voy a pagar dos dolares la hora, bueno, dos veinticinco. Y te voy a cobrar treinta dolares la semana por el cuarto." Claudia and Don Tony's other employees live in virtual slavery, with the women compelled to dance provocatively on stage for the entertainment of rowdy drunks. This atmosphere of barely repressed violence extends to Claudia's private room, where Don Tony tries to rape her. She escapes but is forced to flee as Don Tony plans to turn her in as an illegal. Meanwhile, she has watched Felipe and Elena with her child and having borrowed some money from Gabriel, she snatches the child and tries to return to Mexico. She is caught once again by border police as she tries to cross the Río Bravo. Elena is consumed by guilt at the harm she has caused

Claudia, however, and she confesses to her manipulation of events. Felipe relinquishes custody of the child and begs Claudia to forgive him, but she refuses. The final scene sees her meeting Gabriel once again and leaves a strong implication that a romance will flourish between them.

La ilegal is among Ripstein's most ill-received films. It is relentlessly sensational in tone, its convoluted narrative lacks credibility, and Méndez's acting is decidedly wooden. Paulo Antonio Paranaguá dismisses it as "una película absolutamente impersonal, desangelada, sin pizca de convicción ni delante ni detrás de la cámara."¹⁸ It is difficult to argue that the film is either aesthetically satisfying or enlightening on the subject of emigration. The case at its centre is so unique that it has little relevance to most emigrants, and Claudia is a most unlikely emigrant, a fact underlined by the comments of a woman at Don Tony's bar, who says: "She's too pretty to be an illegal . . . There's something wrong with her." Indeed, she is not initially an illegal alien at all, and it is only when Felipe withdraws his support that she is forced to enter the United States through means of the coyote network. Charles Ramírez Berg also points to the film's confused message, for although Mexicans, not Americans, cause most of Claudia's problems, the hero of the film is Gabriel, who represents the Mexican state.¹⁹ Such readings of the film overlook the key reason for its deficiencies, however. *La ilegal*, as Ripstein himself confirms in an interview with Emilio García Riera, was a vehicle for Méndez that sought to appeal to Spanish speakers in the United States. Besides, Ripstein

¹⁸ Paulo Antonio Paranaguá, 1997, p. 167.

¹⁹ Charles Ramírez Berg, 1992, pp. 199-200.

took on the direction of the film as a commission, with the result that he had little freedom to make it his own:

... como Fritz Lang, cuando una vez lo atacaron por su película *American Guerrilla in the Philippines*, dije: incluso los directores tenemos que comer. Entonces, *La ilegal* es una película rigurosamente alimenticia, y la hice en este plan, aceptando realmente todas las reglas del juego impuestos por Televisine. Querían hacer un melodrama de éxito para el lanzamiento estelar de Lucía Méndez, que ya era muy conocida en televisión.²⁰

Two key issues are highlighted here. Firstly, the director's allusion to the need to take on commercial projects was not a dilemma faced by him alone. The film was made during the *sexenio* of José López Portillo (1976–1982), who appointed his sister Margarita López Portillo to oversee the mass media and the film industry. Her tenure led to increasing commercialisation, as she advocated state intervention in filmmaking and opposed what she termed “the presentation of coarse themes that poison the mind.”²¹ Her attitude made the already difficult task of producing alternative films even more arduous and forced many *nuevo cine* directors to make second-rate films in order to finance their more personal projects.

La ilegal is not entirely without Ripstein's characteristic touches. Despite the obvious restrictions that the filming conditions placed upon him, he nonetheless included a number of scenes that reflect his irreverent sense of humour. The film is distinguished above all by the refusal to blame the United States for the problems endured by Mexican

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

emigrants — Claudia is more often deceived and disappointed by Mexicans than by Americans. Ripstein also takes advantage of the absurdities of the film's staging to mount some memorably comic scenes. He notes that Méndez insisted on wearing high heels throughout the filming, as this was how her public liked to see her dressed. Rather than distracting from the incongruity of her appearance, Ripstein emphasises it, especially when she totters across the Río Bravo in a sequence that is close to being a parody of the hackneyed depiction of women struggling to cross the river while holding a child.²² The second key point made by Ripstein in his interview is that the film is first and foremost a melodrama. This fact makes any discussion on the contradictions of its position on emigration seem rather redundant, for the backdrop of the border crossing is used only to intensify the struggles of the central character in what is essentially a maternal melodrama with elements of the *cabaretera* genre. Ripstein clearly does not offer a deep reflection on the issue involved in illegal emigration, but he does display something of his usual virtuosity in blending filmic genres to create an effective commercial film.

María Novaro's *El jardín del Edén* is a loosely structured multifaceted story set mostly in Tijuana, the legendary border-crossing town between Mexico and the United States, where a 20-kilometre steel wall separates the two nations and where two cultures meet. This episodic film recounts several stories of people and cultures coming together at the border. Serena is a young widow who settles in Tijuana with her three children and attempts to rebuild her life after the death of her husband. Felipe is a young peasant who seeks to cross into the United States. He befriends Serena's teenage son Julián and the

²¹ Carl J. Mora, 1982, pp. 137-140.

American Jane, who comes to the town to visit her Chicana friend Liz. Jane's brother Frank also lives in the town. The sheer scope of the film means that many of the individual elements cannot be developed sufficiently to make them effective. Certainly, the presence of such a complex panorama of characters whose paths cross in the town conveys the idea of its significance as a place in between. Novaro overreaches herself in attempting to deal with so many dimensions of cross-cultural exchange, however. The individual situations of characters are often not explored in enough detail to make them engaging, while the huge cast can make identification with certain characters difficult. For this reason, this analysis will focus on the character of Liz, whose status as a Chicana unsure of her identity is central to the film's theme of Mexican-American relations on the border. In an interview with Alejandro Medrano Platas, Novaro acknowledges that Liz's confusion is emblematic of the multiple voices in her film and the questions about nationhood and belonging that she sought to address:

Claro, es que allá, es muy claro, constantemente, uno tiene que preguntarse, ¿quién soy?, además, si no tienes claro quién eres, te aplasta el otro, te denigra o te pierdes. Yo creo, que en la película, lo traté muy por encimita, porque me centré, sobre todo, en la identidad mexicana en la frontera, de unos de los personajes que es una chicana, finalmente es la reflexión que ella sigue.²³

Novaro's film conveys in vivid detail the nuanced texture of life in a small border town. She reveals its commercial and touristic aspects, as well as the more shady side of life suggested by border crossings and dingy bars. One of the film's strongest visual motifs is

²² Emilio García Riera, 1988, p. 241.

²³ Alejandro Medrano Platas, *Quince directores del cine mexicano*, (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, C.A., 1999), p. 264.

the border itself. Although Novaro is interested in many kinds of borders apart from this physical one, the use of close-ups of the steel barricade to frame the narrative is extremely effective, as it provides a constant reminder of the barriers between the United States and Mexico. These images of the formidable physical barrier presented by the border form the backdrop to her examination of the metaphorical meaning of the term, with relation to the borders between one culture and another and Mexico. It is surely significant that Liz, like the town in which she finds herself, is divided. Novaro has described the border as “una herida que no cicatriza.”²⁴ There is a certain rawness in Liz’s demeanour that recalls this stubborn wound as she faces the painful task of reconciling the American and Mexican aspects of her heritage.

Liz’s foil is Jane, the carefree American who glides through Mexico exploring her fascination with various aspects of its culture. Novaro envisions both Jane and her brother as “muy buenos gringos,”²⁵ and Jane is certainly an appealing character in many ways. Her unbridled enthusiasm for all things Mexican is infectious, and she shows genuine affection for Felipe, who turns to her when he is viciously beaten on his first attempt to cross the border. She becomes so involved in his plight that she puts herself at great risk to smuggle both Felipe and Julián across the border. Jane’s willingness to speak her dreadful Spanish is something of a running joke throughout the film, but it is symptomatic of the deeper lack of understanding between herself and Felipe. It eventually takes on a more serious dimension when Jane realises that she had misunderstood Felipe’s use of the word *’mano* to refer to Julián as literally meaning that

²⁴ Fernando Celin, ‘Comparta nuestros sueños,’ *El Semanario*, (November 5, 1995), p. 7.

²⁵ Alejandro Medrano Platas, 1999, pp. 226-227.

they were brothers when it was intended as a sign of warmth. Her involvement in the illegal border crossing becomes more complex at this point, for she realises that she has unwittingly kidnapped a minor. This dilemma is resolved when Julián goes home of his own accord, but the distance between Jane and Felipe deepens. The final break occurs after they come upon the funeral of a child whose body is to be sent back to Oaxaca to be buried. Jane instinctively gives some money to one of the mourners in a bid to help, a gesture that infuriates Felipe. He rebukes Jane for her insensitivity and suggests that her attempt at generosity has wounded the pride of the funeral party and reduced them to the status of beggars. Jane cannot understand the depth of his fury, and they part soon afterwards.

This incident underlines Novaro's keen awareness of class barriers. In another exchange, the gap between the working-class Felipe and the middle-class Jane and Liz becomes apparent when Liz describes her plans to stage an exhibition of alternative Chicano videos. Although these materials are considered a popular medium, when presented in the context of an art gallery they become artefacts of high culture, a culture that excludes Felipe. He is concerned with survival and escaping poverty by reaching the United States. It is extremely unlikely that he can relate to Liz's search for her identity, and through his eyes it seems rather self-indulgent. Liz's sincerity is clear, however, and the viewer becomes part of her journey to find her true identity as we are privy to scenes from the videos watched by her. The importance of Liz's work in her endeavour to come to terms with her place between worlds is most evident when she argues with Jane, who comments dismissively on the video project:

Jane: I don't want to be some *turista*, watching life from the outside as if life were like, like one of these videos of yours.

Liz: You think that's what I'm doing? Standing back and watching? Do you realise how little you know about me, for instance? You're usually too busy, you know? Listening to yourself, floating around with your little notebook. Quitting jobs, liking everybody. Falling in love with Huave women.

Jane: Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry. It was a terrible example.

Liz: I'm planning my own work, you know? Trying to hear my voice, as you say. And it hasn't been easy coming down here on my own with Lupita. Yes, Lupita! I gave my child the wrong name. I wanted a Mexican name and I couldn't even spell it right.

The linguistic insecurity experienced by Chicanos is captured effectively in this exchange. Jane continually embarrasses Liz by introducing her as Mexican when, as Liz points out, she cannot even speak Spanish. Liz's insecurity about her linguistic abilities is typical of people who are the product of two cultures, as D. Leticia Galindo observes in her study of border Spanish.²⁶ Paradoxically, it is Jane's lack of understanding of Spanish, in the case of Julián's relationship with Felipe, that almost ends in disaster. Furthermore, Liz manages to reconcile the dual aspects of her heritage to a considerable extent, not through words but through the images contained in her exhibition. Perhaps the film's most moving scene occurs as Liz watches a video of an interview with a woman who speaks of the disorientation her distance from her heritage caused her, to the extent that she could not accept even her physical appearance:

²⁶ See D. Leticia Galindo, 'Language Use and Language Attitudes: A Study of Border Women,' *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe*, (Tempe: Arizona State University, Vol.XXI, No.1, January—April 1996), pp. 5-17.

Who is this person? She looks so Indian. And I couldn't connect that with me, and I couldn't connect myself with the dress, the *huipil*, or the blanket. And I was thinking, what other image could be in that mirror that would be me? That I would connect with, and I realised that I was so disconnected from my culture, from my heritage, that it was almost as if I would have expected to see a white person. But it's an image, because that person is really empty, because what would make that person really full would be a fullness, being *indio* and *mexicana*, and it's not there.

Liz manages to overcome her own deracination by appropriating the images seen in her exhibition. In one of the opening scenes, Liz and Jane hug under the fierce gaze of a close-up image of Frida Kahlo's eyes. Later in the narrative, Liz recreates Kahlo's painting, *Las dos Fridas*. Instead of using her own image in Western and Indian dress to suggest the two sides of her heritage, as Kahlo does, Liz holds hands with an Indian woman. This gesture indicates that Liz has learned to relate to the Mexican, and Indian, side of her culture. Jane, in contrast, is left admiring photographs of indigenous women by Graciela Iturbide in a scene that lends a rather fetishistic dimension to her admiration of Mexican culture. Ultimately, Jane remains an outsider, while Liz learns to assimilate in Tijuana society and come to terms with her uniqueness.

El jardín del Edén provides a richly nuanced portrait of border life that eschews stereotypes in favour of a depiction of the complexities of interactions between races, cultures and classes. Novaro's work is distinguished by its awareness of these complexities and her attention to the subtleties of language and the power of visual images. She has expressed her intentions for the film as follows:

. . .la película que yo quería hacer era una reflexión sobre quiénes somos, con una estructura no convencional, manejando muchas cosas de forma semidocumental para hacer una realidad que pienso no se ha mostrado, y que se tiene estereotipada.²⁷

Although the film raises more questions than it answers, it provides a sensitive exploration of life on the border that could not be farther removed from Galindo's utterly negative outlook or Ripstein's sensational approach. The richness of encounters between different people is convincingly portrayed, and even the conflicts that arise from such relationships are presented in an often humorous light, with the result that facile oppositional politics are avoided. Novaro has succeeded admirably in creating a new vision of the border that is unconventional both stylistically and in its refusal to bow to stereotypes.

²⁷ Rosina Conde, 'Entrevista con María Novaro: Con una pata allá y otra acá,' (Mexico City: *La jornada semanal*, No.71, July 14, 1996), p. 15.

The Evolution of Chicano Identity

A recent issue of *Newsweek*¹ featured a cover story on Latinos in the United States under the headline “Latin U.S.A.: How Young Hispanics are Changing America.” This celebratory introduction continues by proclaiming: “Hispanics are hip, hot and about to make history.”² The articles that make up the report are overwhelmingly positive in their presentation of Latinos in North America. The first examines how the sheer number of Latinos will make them a dominant force by 2005, when they become the largest U.S. minority. The second discusses the phenomenon known as Generation Ñ, a phrase coined by Cuban-American Bill Teck, the founder of *Generation Ñ* magazine, to describe the Latino version of Generation X. The report concludes with brief profiles of 20 successful Latinos and an opinion piece by Christy Haubegger, the president and publisher of *Latina* magazine, on what she terms the re-Latinization of the United States. Haubegger is the only writer to accept the current U.S. fascination for all things Latino at face value. She cites the preference for salsa over ketchup as a major cultural watershed and celebrates the focus of the media on Latinos, while predicting an increase in bilingualism in the United States and forecasting that all North American men will finally be able to dance and that Latin music will be widely available. Her final paragraph verges on fantasy:

¹ *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1999)

² Christy Haubegger, *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1999), p. 5.

At the dawn of a new millennium, America knows Latinos as entertainers and athletes. But, some day very soon, all American children can dream of growing up to be writers like Sandra Cisneros, astronauts like Ellen Ochoa, or judges like José Cabranes of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. To put a Latin spin on a famous Anglo phrase: It is truly mañana in America. For those of you who don't know it (yet), that word doesn't just mean tomorrow; mañana also means morning.³

This uncritical account is not only based on extraordinary examples of success but predicts a future of Latino glory based on unquestioning U.S. acceptance of Latino superiority. This scenario is far from realistic. Although the thrust of the other articles in the report is also optimistic, they at least mention the many obstacles still facing Latinos who hope to succeed in North America. Brook Larmer, for instance, acknowledges the popularity of entertainers like Ricky Martin but questions whether this means anything more than a fad: "...many Latinos doubt whether Americans can easily move past the stereotypes that depict them as illegals, gangbangers or entertainers."⁴ The appeal of Ricky Martin and Jennifer Lopez relies heavily on their stereotyped presentations of themselves as fiery Latinos. Lopez prances through her videos in revealing clothing, while Martin, who attempts to portray himself as the archetypal Latin lover, surrounds himself with dozens of sensual female dancers. Although they are clearly profiting from this appropriation of an image that many feel is derogatory to Latinos, their success is

³ Christy Haubegger, 'The Legacy of Generation Ñ,' *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1999), p. 61.

⁴ Brook Larmer, 'Latino America,' *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1999), p. 50.

unlikely to lead to a deeper appreciation of or interest in Latino culture among non-Latinos. John Leland and Veronica Chambers, in a subsequent piece, address concerns such as the poor health and diet, high delinquency and dropout rates, and divorce and domestic abuse that have afflicted second and third generation Latinos. This article also raises questions about family divisions from generation to generation and racial prejudice both from North Americans and other Hispanics.⁵

What is clear from this report, overall, is the degree of optimism that Latinos feel about the future and the considerable gains they have made despite economic disadvantages and problems such as prejudice and inferior education. The successful stars, athletes or scholars profiled in this issue, while in many ways exceptional, are role models for people who at last have reason to hope that they can compete in U.S. society on more equal terms. Above all, the report shows a new interest on the part of U.S. readers in the Hispanic population and a willingness to examine aspects of this culture other than the long-lamented problems of gang warfare or drug abuse. For this reason, it is a fitting introduction to the subject of Chicano culture and a milestone in the coverage of Chicano issues in the mainstream U.S. media.

To appreciate the social and cultural advances made by Chicanos as a minority group, we need only look back to the early days of Chicano settlement in the United States, long

⁵ John Leland and Veronica Chambers, 'Generation Ñ,' *Newsweek*, (July 12, 1999), pp. 53-58.

before cinema was even invented. At this time, Mexicans inhabited a vast area of what is today the American Southwest. The eventual annexation of these lands led to an extraordinary situation for the Mexicans who resided there and who became aliens in their own land. As well as coming to terms with this tumultuous change, these Mexicans had to cope with mass emigration by North American settlers. This emigration was mirrored later by the movement of Mexicans into the United States, particularly after the unrest and hardship that followed the Mexican Revolution. These events have been chronicled in history books and novels, but the cinematic representation of the development of a Mexican-American people is inextricably bound up with the emergence of the Chicano movement. The growth of this cinema is also significant in that it presented a reaction to the demeaning, racist portrayals of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Hollywood cinema.

This survey of Chicano cinema begins with an overview of the events that preceded the settlement of vast numbers of Mexicans in the United States and an examination of the history of emigration to *el norte*. It moves through the contentious area of the naming of people of Mexican descent in the United States and considers the development of a Chicano identity, particularly with regard to the Chicano movement and *La Raza*. In very general terms, it is true to say that all Chicano films tell the same basic story. To some extent, all the films examined here deal with the difficulties involved in living between the cultures of Mexico and North America or the decision to choose one over the other.

They represent individuals who face internal struggles, whether with their families, friends or fellow gang members, that must be overcome before the external problems posed by U.S. society can be addressed and surmounted. The films in question are grouped into subgenres that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They nonetheless shed light on the challenges Chicano filmmakers face in making films that speak both to a Chicano and a mainstream U.S. audience and on the limitations and possibilities presented by this unique situation.

The history of Chicano people as an ethnic minority in the United States begins in the period when the lands that were annexed by the United States after the Mexican-American War were still part of Mexico. In his seminal study of North America's diverse ethnic composition, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*⁶, Ronald Takaki chronicles the changes that took place in what is today the American Southwest as Mexican rule ceded to that of U.S. settlers. This area was originally settled in 1542 by Spanish coloniser Hernán Cortés in the name of the Spanish crown. Two centuries later, 21 Catholic missions were established along 500 miles of the Californian coast. Although some of the settlers at this time came from Spain, most were Mexicans recruited from the ranks of the desperately poor and lured with the promise of equipment, food and cattle. Ironically, in the light of events that would take place only a century

⁶ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), pp. 166-171.

later, the area suffered from a lack of people willing to come and live there. In 1781, for instance, there were only about 600 settlers in Alta California.⁷ For this reason, Mexicans initially welcomed foreigners from the United States, as Takaki confirms: “Coming to California as individuals and few in number, the first Americans were generally accepted, even offered land grants by the Mexican government if they converted to Catholicism and became naturalized citizens.”⁸ It is interesting to note that even at this stage, when all settlers were ostensibly welcome and there was as yet no question of territorial disputes, it was clearly desirable for North Americans to integrate as far as possible into Mexican society by not only relinquishing their citizenship but also changing their religion.

The amicable acceptance of U.S. immigrants came to an abrupt end in the 1840s, as North Americans dreaming of wealth and land arrived in great numbers to California during the gold rush. The state of Texas played a key role in the conflicts between U.S. settlers and the Mexican government. Many of the North Americans who had settled in Texas during the 1820s were slaveholders from the South in search of land for cotton cultivation. In the 1830s, the Mexican government outlawed slavery and made further emigration from the United States illegal. In response, a band of North Americans began an armed insurrection in 1836 that culminated in the annexation of Texas by U.S. forces

⁷ Ronald Takaki, 1993, p. 168.

⁸ Ronald Takaki, 1993, p. 170.

in 1845. Mexico broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, prompting President James K. Polk to order his troops into the disputed territory in 1846. This action led to the Mexican-American War, which took place from 1846 to 1848 and led to the seizure of almost half of Mexico's territory by the U.S. government. As Chicano writer Nash Candelaria notes, the war was justified by the idea of manifest destiny:

For the United States the nineteenth century was a century of conquest — a century of manifest destiny when the country embarked on and consolidated its imperialistic expansion across the North American continent to the Pacific Ocean.⁹

This ideology spurred President James K. Polk to consider his war against a clearly inferior army justified. Invented by John O'Sullivan, the editor of the *Democratic Review* at the time, the theory was based on early Puritan beliefs of Providence and outlined North America's mission thus:

Effectively declaring the superiority of the white Anglo-Saxon, the ideology of the nation's manifest destiny was widely used by journalists to spread the justification of expansion and the subsequent exclusion of "foreign" Mexicans from the way the national community was imagined.¹⁰

⁹ Nash Candelaria, 'Literature About Nineteenth-Century Chicanos: One Writer's Viewpoint,' *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe*, Tempe: Arizona State University, (Vol. XXI, No 1., January—April 1996), p. 34.

¹⁰ Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 34.

Despite attempts to legitimise the war, it provoked outrage among many North Americans. Ulysses S. Grant condemned it as “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation.”¹¹ His sentiments were shared by Congressman Abraham Lincoln, Senator John C. Calhoun, and other notable citizens such as writer Henry David Thoreau, whose protest against the war led to his imprisonment.¹² The outcome of the war devastated the Mexican community, who became foreigners in their own land, relegated to a subaltern position in relation to U.S. interlopers with different customs, laws and language. In the words of Albert Camarillo:

This country’s war of annexation against Mexico (and the Texas Revolution a decade earlier) led to American acquisition of a vast territory and its Spanish-speaking population. Chicano history is, thus, part of that larger history of westward expansion by the United States and its subsequent domination of societies with different racial, cultural, socioeconomic, and political characteristics.¹³

The defeat of Mexico was sealed in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which changed the destiny of the Mexicans who remained in what had become the American Southwest forever. David C. Gutiérrez notes that this treaty provided for the payment by the United States of \$15 million for over half of Mexico’s lands — Texas, California,

¹¹ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, p. 80.

¹² James D. Cockcroft, 1989, p. 80.

¹³ Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2.

Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. It formally granted the full protection of the U.S. Constitution and citizenship to all Mexicans who chose to remain in the territory north of the new international border.¹⁴ In practice, however, deeply ingrained racist attitudes towards Mexicans and the fact that they constituted a minority in the new North American states meant that the recently created Mexican-Americans were in no position to insist on their rights. Gutierréz explains this situation as follows:

Combined with the pervasiveness of negative American attitudes toward Mexicans, the change in sovereignty over Mexico's former northern provinces deeply affected the lives of the nearly 100,000 ethnic Mexicans who had become American citizens under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Incorporated into the United States by conquest and soon overwhelmed in most areas of the Southwest by the rapid influx of Anglo American and European immigrants, most Mexican Americans found themselves occupying an extremely tenuous position in the rapidly changing Americanized Southwest. Generally perceived and defined by their American conquerors as an inferior, backward people, the vast majority of the Mexican American population faced serious obstacles to the free enjoyment of their new status as American citizens.¹⁵

Although many Mexicans chose to return to Mexico rather than remain in a territory so

¹⁴ David C. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 13.

¹⁵ David C. Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 20.

utterly transformed, paradoxically, the late 19th century and early 20th century saw great numbers of Mexicans emigrating to the United States. The class-stratified society that emerged in Mexico after the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century was founded on a miserably paid and badly treated workforce. The concentration of land in the hands of a wealthy élite had continued, with the result that many Mexicans made the arduous journey north in the hope of earning a reasonable living denied them in their native land.

The first substantial wave of emigration from Mexico to the United States closely followed the Mexican-American War, when gold was discovered in California. At this time, border restrictions were minimal and there were virtually no immigration laws. As well as providing much-needed labour, Mexicans brought skill and experience in mining. The idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority that underpinned the theory of manifest destiny and the arrogance of the conqueror towards the conquered in the recent war meant that Mexicans suffered from widespread discrimination. Such discrimination often took the form of threats, violence and restrictive legislation.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Mexican Revolution, which plunged the country into chaos and violence and devastated the economy, provided a further impetus for Mexicans to leave their homes and journey to *el norte*.

¹⁶ Juan F. Perea, ed., *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 191-192.

Although the aftermath of the Mexican-American War was a particularly dark period in Mexican-American relations, there followed many other abuses of Mexican rights that cemented bitterness against the United States among many Mexicans. In his much-cited memoir *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, George J. Sánchez explores the processes of adaptation and acculturation among Chicanos during 45 years of significant change. Sánchez points out that North American businesses had a strong economic interest in maintaining the massive movement of workers from Mexico to the United States in the early 20th century. The overabundance of labour in Mexico meant that U.S. employers could keep wages low and quickly quash any threat to the labour supply.¹⁷ The first immigration act, which placed substantive restrictions on European and Mexican emigrants alike, was passed in 1917, although Mexicans were exempt until 1921. After 1917, the crossing to the United States became increasingly humiliating, as Mexicans were forced to endure baths, which were intended to stop emigrants from spreading diseases like influenza. A 1924 act charged Mexican immigrants a \$10 fee to secure a visa, a fee that led to a drop in legal immigration from 90,000 in 1924 to 32,378 later that year.¹⁸ These hardships paled in comparison to the austere measures implemented when immigration was no longer deemed beneficial to U.S. society. The harsh treatment endured by Mexican-Americans during the 1930s, a period of severe recession in North America, led to the beginning of a

¹⁷ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900—1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 39-40.

¹⁸ George J. Sánchez, 1993, pp. 55-7.

unique Mexican-American identity. Until this time, there was no real opposition to Mexican immigration, despite racist feelings towards Mexicans among some U.S. citizens. This relatively benign attitude toward immigrants in general and Mexican-Americans in particular changed, however, as Camarillo observes:

Increasingly throughout the 1920s, Mexicans everywhere were identified as a welfare problem (a burden on welfare agencies) and a labor problem (a large, cheap labor source taking jobs away from Americans). By the second half of the decade, labor unions, community and municipal welfare agencies, chambers of commerce, local politicians, and others were joining the movement to restrict unlimited Mexican immigration. As the Great Depression drew near, the destiny of hundreds of thousands of people was decided by federal and local anti-Mexican forces who sought to alleviate the problem.¹⁹

In fact, there was little attempt to solve the problem. Instead, U.S. authorities sought to eliminate the presence of Mexican workers. The fact that many of the labourers in question were Mexican-Americans was merely a detail, as all persons of Mexican descent were dealt with in the same harsh manner. Anti-immigrant attitudes intensified throughout the 1930s, as so-called aliens were blamed for the economic crisis, while the U.S. government sought ways to limit demands on scarce resources. President Herbert Hoover, who had enthusiastically welcomed Mexican farm workers during World War I to maintain wartime production when he was Food Administrator, denounced Mexicans

¹⁹ Albert Camarillo, 1996, p. 227.

for taking jobs.²⁰ He initiated a deportation programme that sent thousands of Mexican immigrants, both legal and illegal, back to Mexico and curtailed immigration to the United States. He actively approved the vigorous persecution of illegal aliens still living in North America.²¹ Hoover's repatriation programme deported thousands of Mexican-Americans in order to save on welfare costs. Citizenship was no defence against deportation, and many families were divided.

Even for those who remained in the United States, conditions were difficult. By the 1920s, over 100,000 people moved to southern California each year, among them many Mexican immigrants. Governor Hiram Johnson, who had been elected in 1913, wasted no time in attempting to assimilate these immigrants, making it clear that they were only welcome on U.S. terms. Simon Lubin, who would eventually head the Commission on Immigration and Housing in California, envisioned an agency that would foster mutual accommodation between North Americans and foreign immigrants, with an emphasis on the cultural strengths that foreigners brought to U.S. society. This approach proved unpopular, however, and by 1923 a conservative approach to the Americanisation of immigrants prevailed. Ellwood P. Cubberley of Stanford University took over as the leading spokesman for the Americanisation work in the state. As early as 1909 he had outlined his task as follows:

²⁰ George J. Sánchez, 1993, p. 213.

²¹ Norris Hundley Jr., ed., *The Chicano*, (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1975), p. 110.

... to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as part of our American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government.²²

What is notable about this manifesto is the almost religious language in which it is couched and its close relation to the idea of manifest destiny in its certainty that North American ways are best. Cubberley's focus is on the children of immigrants, whom he appears to consider better targets for indoctrination with Anglo-Saxon ideas of morality, law and government than their parents, who must be separated from their peers in order to assimilate them. This focus is also significant because of the fact that in California particularly, the dominant society paid little attention to the Mexican population until it realised that not all Mexicans would eventually return to live in Mexico. Attempts to deal with the presence of Mexicans concentrated on homogenising them by converting them to U.S. customs outlined by Camarillo:

Through Protestant missionary efforts and municipal and charitable institutional programs, Mexicans became a favorite target for assimilationists: they were expected to shed their cultural distinctiveness and adopt Anglo standards (household and family care practices, "American" cooking, hygiene). These Americanization programs were generally unsuccessful, since they failed to deal with the hard economic and social realities faced by most Chicanos.²³

²² George J. Sánchez, 1993, p. 90-95.

²³ A. Camarillo, 1996, pp. 225-226.

In the event, Americanisation programmes never had the chance to succeed, as the Depression brought them to a sudden end, and the government sought to get rid of immigrants altogether rather than assimilate them. These programmes had a profound effect on Mexican-American communities, nonetheless, sometimes producing unintended results. Some Mexican-Americans learned from them that the only way that they could successfully participate in North American society was to minimise their differences and adopt a veneer of patriotism.

The outbreak of World War II awoke a new pride in their adopted country in many Mexican-American men, who, unable to attend college and lacking the skills needed to enter the defence services, were drafted into or volunteered for armed service. Raul Morin, the author of *Among the Valiant*, writes that members of Company E, 141st Regiment of the 36th (Texas) Division, a completely Mexican-American infantry company, were amongst the most highly decorated soldiers after the War.²⁴ Carlos Muñoz Jr. argues that despite the honours bestowed on Mexican-American servicemen, the Mexican-American Movement saw the war less in terms of defeating fascism than as an opportunity for the advancement of Mexican-Americans who had served: “They perceived World War II as the single most significant event that would make possible the acceptance and integration of Mexican Americans into US society.”²⁵

²⁴ Edward Ludwig, ed., *The Chicanos: Mexican American Voices*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 4-5.

²⁵ Carlos Muñoz Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*, (London: Verso, 1989), p. 38.

A deeply ironic consequence of the war was that the U.S. government, which only a few years before had forcibly uprooted Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, was once again desperate for Mexican labour and appealed to the Mexican government for help. In order to protect its citizens from the brutal treatment and discrimination that they had previously endured, the Mexican government entered into a formal agreement with the United States. The Mexican Labor Program, popularly known as the *bracero* program, was first implemented on August 4, 1942, and renewed on April 26, 1943.²⁶ Under this agreement, Mexico allowed its people to work in the United States for temporary, renewable periods under agreed conditions, which included a stipulation that there should be no discrimination against *braceros*. Once again, these conditions were largely ignored by both the U.S. government and the employers, crop growers. On arriving in the United States, migrant labourers generally endured oppressive working environments. Paradoxically, during a period in which some Mexican-Americans identified strongly with their adopted land and sought to assimilate by serving in the army, and while even Mexicans helped the war effort through their labour, others celebrated their difference, an often-overlooked point that Gutiérrez emphasises: “Although thousands of Mexican Americans did begin to think of themselves more as Americans than as Mexicans during the 1940s, thousands more remained deeply ambivalent about their cultural and national

²⁶ Juan F. Perea, ed., 1997, pp. 194-195.

identities even at the height of the war.”²⁷ In the barrios of Los Angeles, younger Mexican-Americans forged a separate identity and expressed their individuality by wearing flamboyant outfits that became known as “zoot suits”:

There were at first two particular types of dress for male gang members. One type originated in El Paso and consisted of high-waisted pants and bell-bottomed trousers. Another style involved fully draped pegged-bottom pants, a long jacket, and a porkpie hat. The latter style in time became more popular and became known as the zoot suit. Young women also belonged to gangs and possessed their own distinctive dress. Some wore very short skirts, while others favored pegged skirts. Hairdos were also distinctive.²⁸

The wartime imprisonment of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps meant that local newspapers turned their attention to the Mexican-American community as a substitute target for hatemongering.²⁹ In 1942 and 1943, several newspapers published lurid accounts of crimes supposedly committed by these youths, dubbing them the “zoot suiter menace.” One such account followed the trial of a group of Mexican-Americans allegedly involved in murder. On August 2, 1942, José Diaz was found dead in a water-filled gravel pit. The previous evening, he had attended a party that was also host to members of the 38th Street Club, one of at least 35 youth gangs in Los Angeles in the

²⁷ David C. Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 118.

²⁸ Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 104.

²⁹ Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, p. 4.

early 1940s. The police jailed the entire gang after the body was found and charged 22 of them with criminal conspiracy. Although little evidence connected the suspects to the killing, they were denied bail and deprived of their constitutional rights to adequate legal representation and a fair trial. Trial publicity was fervently anti-Mexican, while the trial itself was full of irregularities, including the refusal of Judge Charles W. Fricke to allow the defendants to cut their hair or change their zoot-suit clothes. After this trial and other incidents involving anti-Mexican racism, tensions finally came to a head in early June 1943, when ten days of violent clashes between Mexican-American youths, U.S. servicemen and civilians erupted in what became known as the Zoot Suit Riots of Los Angeles.³⁰

These events proved to be a watershed for Mexican-American consciousness. The illusion that assimilation was possible was shattered and the racism of the American legal system and society in general became starkly apparent. The Zoot Suit Riots also further marked the gap between Mexican-Americans who aspired to become North Americans and those who sought a meaningful expression of their dual identities as both Mexicans and North Americans. Older Mexican-Americans certainly sympathised with their younger counterparts and opposed the racism that they endured. They were often more likely to blame the attitudes of the younger generation for trouble than to acknowledge the unfairness of a supposedly democratic system, however. Paul Coronel, the first

³⁰ George J. Sánchez, 1993, pp. 266-7.

president of the Mexican-American Movement, wrote an editorial for *The Mexican Voice* interpreting the cause of the riots as the victimisation of a minority group. His other conclusions were less encouraging for the younger generation, nevertheless:

Coronel asserted ... that Mexican Americans were also to be blamed for contributing to the conditions which created the conflict. Coronel criticized Mexican parents for not encouraging education, for failing to adopt United States citizenship, and for not leaving behind Mexican cultural traditions that made integration into the mainstream of American life difficult. *The Mexican Voice* editorial criticized pachucos who participated in the riots for giving Mexican Americans a bad name. He made it clear, however, that pachucos were products of the United States, not Mexico.³¹

This statement vividly illustrates the differences between the Mexican-American establishment and the younger generation. Coronel's willingness on the one hand to blame the adherence to Mexican customs for the lack of integration into U.S. life and his insistence on the other that so-called pachucos were North Americans shows the impossible standards that were imposed on the Mexican-Americans who forged the Chicano movement. They were at once too Mexican to please their parents' generation's desire to adapt to U.S. culture and too North American to be considered authentically Mexican. Not surprisingly, this new generation looked to U.S. society and their Mexican past rather than to older Mexican-Americans to forge a new ideology. The search for

³¹ Carlos Muñoz Jr., 1989, p. 38.

new solutions among Chicano Movement leaders led to the realisation that a new identity could only be forged if the misleading representations of Chicanos in history could be overturned. In effect, the creation of a distinct identity became central to the Chicano Movement.

In his collection of essays, *Myself With Others*, Mexican author Carlos Fuentes reflects on his experiences as the child of a diplomat who was brought up in many different countries. His time in the United States taught him the importance of conforming in order to belong and distract from his foreignness. Fuentes' illusion of belonging was shattered, however, when Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalised the holdings of foreign oil companies, an act that led him to be denounced in the U.S. press as a 'red' president presiding over a "communist" government. Fuentes instantly became an outcast. This incident led him both to recognise his status as an outsider and, for the first time, to realise that Mexico was a real place with a history to which his identity was inextricably bound:

Was that past mine as well? Could I dream the dreams of the country suddenly revealed in a political act as something more than a demarcation of frontiers on a map or a hillock of statistics in a yearbook? I believe I then had the intuition that I would not rest until I came to grips myself with that common destiny which depended on still another community: the community of time. The United States made me believe that we live only for the future; Mexico, Cárdenas, the events of 1938, made me understand that only in an act of the present can we make present the past as well

as the future: to be a Mexican was to identify a hunger for being, a desire for dignity rooted in many forgotten centuries and in many centuries yet to come, but rooted here, now, in the instant, in the vigilant time of Mexico I later learned to understand in the stone serpents of Teotihuacán and in the polychrome angels of Oaxaca.³²

Fuentes' revelation highlights a number of truths about the essence of identity. Firstly, identity is not necessarily an important matter to those who belong to a dominant group in society. Fuentes mistakenly believed that he had been accepted as part of North American society, and it was only when he acknowledged his lack of belonging that he began to come to terms with his Mexican heritage. Secondly, the instability of identity is obvious from this passage. Identity is to a great extent a matter of choice, and Fuentes had identified more closely with North America than Mexico before his nationality was the cause of his rejection by the dominant group. Finally, identity is seen as a product of history that is not immutable but subject to the vicissitudes of time or changes in political relationships. The weight of the past affects the future and is a significant force in the shaping of one's future destiny. To sum up, then, identity is of crucial importance to minority or marginalised groups, who need both to belong to a distinct group and to distinguish themselves from the dominant society.

This complexity is reflected in the evolution of a group identity among people of

³² Carlos Fuentes, *Myself With Others*, (New York: Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 8.

Mexican origin in the United States. Whatever the reasons that predicate the creation of an identity, the idea of belonging to a particular group or community is clearly desirable, as George A. de Vos observes:

A sense of common origin, of common beliefs and values, and of a common feeling of survival — in brief, a “common cause” — has been important in uniting people into self-defining groups. Growing up together in a social unit and sharing a common verbal and gestural language allows humans to develop mutually understood accommodations, which radically diminish situations of possible confrontation and conflict.³³

De Vos’s statement points to the comfort and protection offered by assimilation into a group that has a distinct identity. These are certainly important considerations, particularly for the Mexican-American community, which lacks political autonomy or even a distinct territory. His thesis seems to suggest that it is natural to want to be part of a distinct social group, which is presented as a monolithic entity. In fact, the decision to belong to a group, and even the composition of the group itself, are far more arbitrary than it would appear.

Examinations of identity have traditionally focused on areas such as nationhood, ethnicity and language. According to Tzvetan Todorov, the nation can be defined as “both

³³ George A. de Vos, and Lola Romanucci Ross, eds., *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation*, (California: AltaMira Press, 1995), p. 15.

political and cultural. Whereas cultural and political entities have always existed, the nation as such is an innovation introduced in Europe in modern times.”³⁴ Todorov makes the important point that nations are not organic but created. They are also relatively recent phenomena that are rooted in a particular European context. In recent years, the nation has become a questionable basis for the formation of a group identity. As well as being a creation, the nation is an unsatisfactory model because it is based on a series of contradictions that have frustrated theorists, as Benedict Anderson asserts in his landmark study of nationality, *Imagined Communities*. Anderson points out that the objective modernity of nations in the historian’s eye is countered by their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. The formal universality of nationality as a social and cultural idea is put into question by the particularity of its concrete form, while the political power of nationalisms is at odds with their lack of philosophical meaning. As a result of these contradictions and the instability of theories of nationhood, Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community . . . because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lies the image of their communion.”³⁵

The sense that a nation or community is essentially an artificial phenomenon, composed of people who subscribe to shared ideals yet in practice may be very different is

³⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 171.

³⁵ Anderson, B., 1991, p. 6.

supported by Edward W. Said. Often, the need to distinguish oneself from another culture may be a more urgent driving force behind the wish to belong to a group than any meaningful commonality between members:

As the twentieth century moves to a close, there has been a gathering awareness nearly everywhere of the lines *between* cultures, the division and differences that not only allow us to discriminate one culture from another, but also enable us to see the extent to which cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote.³⁶

Thus the community, which is formed in an effort to distinguish its members from another culture, may in fact be formed by people who have relatively little in common, despite their shared origins or desire to belong to a group. The criteria on which membership are based may be reductive or even capricious, moreover. The idea of the nation has also been discredited in the 20th century by its use to mobilize people to participate in nationalistic disputes that have ravaged countries such as the former Yugoslavia. Rather than evoking connotations of patriotism and love of one's country, today the idea of the nation has been tainted by extremism, racism and genocide in Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

³⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture & Imperialism*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 15.

The negative images associated with the nation have led to an emphasis on ethnicity as the basis of identity. The distinctions between national and ethnic identification are subtle, but the latter concentrates on history and origin in more of a cultural than a political sense. Ethnicity, like nationalism, places great emphasis on matters such as racial origin and language, but a shared culture is interpreted rather more broadly and the matter of territoriality is not central. In the case of Mexican-Americans, for instance, the group may share a racial and cultural identity but reside in a foreign land as a minority group that is often marginalised because of poverty and the unwillingness to assimilate. Language is perhaps the most persistently evoked signifier of a common heritage among these groups, but, as de Vos observes, “ethnicity is frequently related more to the symbolism of a separate language than to its actual use by all members of a group.”³⁷

William Boelhower asserts that the importance of language to ethnicity is nonetheless evident in the act of naming: “The foundations of ethnicity are based on the genealogical elaboration of the story behind one’s name, one’s family name. By discovering the self implicit in the surname, one produces an ethnic seeing and understands himself as a social, an ethnic, subject.”³⁸ The centrality of naming is not restricted to the individual or the family unit. A striking aspect of academic writing on topics relating to Chicanos is the constant debate about what people of Mexican descent who live in the United States

³⁷ George A. de Vos, ed., 1995, p. 23.

³⁸ William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 81.

should be called. Suzanne Oboler, whose book *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*, is entirely devoted to the consequences of naming, notes that the U.S. census uses the terms Spanish or Hispanic indiscriminately to describe an extremely diverse group of people from different nationalities, customs and backgrounds:

A person is of Spanish/Hispanic origin if the person's origin (ancestry) is Mexican, Mexican-Am., Chicano, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Salvadoran; from other Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean or Central or South America; or from Spain.³⁹

Oboler lays the blame for this overgeneralised naming of Latino groups squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. government. She claims that the classification of Latino groups is a contentious matter as a result of government usage of sweeping or inaccurate terminology:

Insofar as the ethnic label Hispanic homogenizes the varied social and political experiences of more than 23 million people of different races, classes, languages, national origins, genders, and religions, it is perhaps not surprising that the meanings and uses of the term have become the subject of confusion and debate in the social sciences, government agencies, and much of the society at large.⁴⁰

³⁹ Suzanne Oboler, 1995, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Suzanne Oboler, 1995, p. 3.

This lack of sensitivity on the part of the government is perhaps best appreciated in the Census Board's grouping together of not only various peoples from Central and South America but also Spain in the same category. Undoubtedly, such an all-encompassing approach to race confuses the U.S. public and upsets members of the distinct communities homogenised by a virtually meaningless definition of their origins. It is surprising, then, that the definition clearly distinguishes between the terms Mexican-American and Chicano, which are separated by far more subtle concerns than origin. Oboler's comment on the importance of correct naming is not simply a matter of political correctness but points to the tendency of people within ethnic groups to describe themselves in various ways, a fact that is confirmed in numerous writings on Chicano society. Mario T. García, for instance, confirms the existence of these regional variations in his book on Mexican-American labour and community activist Bert Corona, adding that such variations were prevalent even among smaller groups:

“Spanish American” (sometimes simply “Spanish”) and “Mexican American,” together with “Latin American” (sometimes “Latin”), “Chicano (-a)” and “Mexican,” are terms having the greatest currency in the American Southwest where members of this sizable minority are concentrated. They are the important terms by which “Hispanos”... refer to themselves

collectively. But, with the exception of Chicano, they are used by Hispanos only when speaking in English.⁴¹

The term Chicano is still seen by members of an older generation as politicised and is associated with the student activists of the 1960s.⁴² Some Chicano writers take a more lighthearted approach to the use of terminology to describe one's status. Enrique Hank Lopez, in an essay on his origins, lists several slang terms used to describe Chicanos. He defines himself as a *pocho*:

Pocho is ordinarily a derogatory term in Mexico (to define it succinctly, a pocho is a Mexican slob who has pretensions of being a gringo sonofabitch), but I use it in a very special sense. To me that word has come to mean "uprooted Mexican," and that's what I've been all my life.⁴³

This passage, though ironic, crystallises the problem of self-naming for Chicanos.

Caught between two cultures, they must choose between identifying with the Mexican side of their heritage or becoming assimilated into U.S. society. Another Chicano writer, Albert S. Herrera, points out that there are even terms to describe this identification with one culture or the other:

⁴¹ Richard L. Nostrand, "'Mexican American' and 'Chicano': Emerging Terms for a People Coming of Age," Norris Hundley Jr., ed., 1975, p. 143.

⁴² For one example of such usage of the term, see Carlos Muñoz Jr., 1989, p. 67.

⁴³ Enrique Hank Lopez, 'Back to Bachimba,' Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, p. 261.

The first class of Mexican Americans..., those who live almost wholly within a Mexican culture, refers to the second class as the *agringados* or the *presumidos*, Mexicans who act like Anglo Americans or who are presumptuous. The second class, on the other hand, calls the first class the *atrasados* or the *pelados*, backward or penniless nobodies.⁴⁴

The plethora of names used to describe Mexican-Americans points to the varied experiences that people of Mexican origin have had in the United States. Some object to being grouped together with people of different nationalities; others use regional terms to define themselves. Some use terms that make their identification more local still, some feel that the term Chicano is distinctly political rather than ethnic, while it is common to use derogatory descriptions to denote the allegiance of their counterparts with Chicano or North American culture. The distinctions between various forms of classification of Mexican-Americans point once more to the contentious choices involved in ethnic identity. In her monograph on the experience of Jewish people in the United States, *Jewish Identity and Self Esteem: Healing Wounds Through Ethnotherapy*, Judith Weinstein Klein classifies three distinct types of ethnic identifiers:

⁴⁴ Albert S. Herrera, 'The Mexican American in Two Cultures,' Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, p.249.

This extremely emotive passage illustrates the synthesis between the Mexican past and the Mexican-American present that Aztlán embodies. Although Chicanos are exhorted to remember past injustices, there is a clear suggestion that their past will give them the strength to unite and overcome their difficulties through the recognition of their unique cultural identity. Brotherhood is all-important and will mean that the American oppressor will finally be overcome. This vision proved to be decidedly idealistic, however, as divisions among Mexican-Americans, especially generational conflicts, persisted. Labour leader Bert Corona, a member of the original Mexican-American community, articulates these differences and underlines the critical attitudes that the older generation had of the Chicano Movement:

The sixties generation had a new religion. They were very nationalistic and adopted the religious tenets of the Aztecs, and they were very anti-gringo. But, in the end, their rebellion was a personal rebellion; they built a movement around their personal likes and dislikes. They didn't understand where the power was.⁶²

Corona appears to approve of the nationalism and anti-Americanism of the Chicano Movement, as well as its recourse to Mexican history. He obviously opposes the individualistic slant of the protests, however, and implies that the desire for separatism is naive. Corona and his peers believed that they could improve their lot by assimilating

⁶² Mario T. García, 1994, p. 258.

revival was another important document called “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.” This spiritual plan was inspired by the writings of Corky Gonzales and Chicano poet Alurista. Aztlán was the name used by the Aztecs to refer to the place of their origin. Thus, by extension, this territory, which included all the southwestern United States taken from Mexico after the Mexican-American War, was the symbolic territorial base of the Chicano people.⁶⁰ The term Aztlán came to have diverse political and cultural usages. It had tremendous symbolic weight as the stolen homeland of the Chicano people, but it also came to signify the community of people of Mexican descent resident in North America. The preface to “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” makes the resonance of the term clear:

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal ‘Gringo’ invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán, from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility and our inevitable destiny ... Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggle against the foreigner ‘Gabacho’ who exploits our riches and destroys our culture ... We are a Bronze People with a Bronze Culture ... We are Aztlán.⁶¹

⁶⁰ David C. Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 185.

⁶¹ Carlos Muñoz Jr., 1989, pp. 77-8.

assimilationism of earlier generations of Mexican Americans, affirming precisely those identities previously devalorized in relation to the dominant culture.⁵⁸

Given the divisions between different generations of Mexican-Americans, Chicano activists saw that it was not enough to appeal to desires for better living and working conditions. In order to overcome the many negative images associated with their people, they needed to reinterpret the past. A key term used by Chicano activists in their efforts to build cohesion in their community was 'La Raza,' which had gained currency in the Southwest after annexation:

The increasing use of "La Raza" as a generic term in the Spanish-language press was evidence of a new kind of ethnic consciousness....La Raza connoted racial, spiritual, and blood ties with the Latin American people, particularly with Mexico. And La Raza emerged as the single most important symbol of ethnic pride and identification.⁵⁹

The members of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s did not limit themselves to using the rhetoric of past attempts to form a distinct identity, however. These activists believed that Mexican-Americans could overcome their sense of alienation by seeing themselves as a historical rather than a deracinated people. Chicano historians discovered old heroes and integrated past events into a new nationalist framework. Central to this historical

⁵⁸ Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 28-29.

⁵⁹ David C. Gutiérrez, 1995, p. 36.

The Vietnam War, a central event in the development of 1960s radicalism, also revealed the unique position of Mexican-Americans. The experiences of Mexican-American soldiers in Vietnam differed to those of other soldiers because many Mexican-Americans, especially those from deprived, Spanish-speaking barrios, found that they identified more closely with their supposed enemy than with their fellow soldiers, who were sometimes racist towards them. The notion of Chicanos as brothers of the Vietnamese has endured in Chicano writing.⁵⁷ The subaltern position of Mexican-Americans, who were at once natives and foreigners in the United States, intensified their quest to form a distinctive identity that marked them as different from other minority or marginalised groups. Their desire to reposition themselves in U.S. society and move from being a disparaged 'Other' to a people with a proud heritage mobilized members of the Chicano movement to appropriate Mexican history and myth in an attempt to underline their uniqueness:

The social and political context of the Chicano Movement opened up a discursive space for the formulation of alternative representations of Chicano/a cultural identity. Rather than conforming Chicano/a identity into the melting-pot ideology, Chicano Movement intellectuals rejected the

⁵⁷ See George Mariscal, ed., *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

migrants and a field worker since the age of ten, devised the Delano Proclamation, which announced the beginning of a social movement and called for unity among farm workers against those who exploited them. The strike also led to the foundation of the Farm Worker Press under Chávez's guidance and the establishment of the first Chicano theatre, *El Teatro Campesino*, by Luis Valdez.⁵⁵

These disparate groups were united by an underlying ideology that combined North American and Mexican elements to create a new Chicano culture. The ideology was North American in that it drew on the achievements of other minority groups that had fought for civil rights and in its insistence on the entitlement of Chicanos to better education and working conditions. Mexican-Americans had protested against U.S. injustice since the 1880s, however, as Rodolfo Acuña points out:

Many Chicanos have incorrectly labeled the second half of the 1960s as the birth of the Chicano movement. Mexicans in the United States have responded to injustice and oppression since the U.S. wars of aggression that took Texas and the Southwest from Mexico.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, pp. 9-13.

⁵⁶ Rodolfo Acuña, 'Early Chicano Activism,' Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., 1998, pp. 315-316.

Ethnic pride . . . grew steadily during the 1960s and 1970s, the desirability of cultural pluralism replacing the earlier goal of total assimilation into the great American melting pot. To be a hyphenated American endowed one with a source of pride, a feeling of uniqueness, and a particular perspective from which to view the often confusing events of history.⁵³

Although historians have tended to focus principally on the growth in racial pride and advances made by African-Americans in this decade, these changes created a political atmosphere that inspired Mexican-Americans to reassess their heritage and value their distinctiveness. For the first time, working-class youths had access to higher education. The G.I. Bill also meant that Mexican-Americans who had served in World War II were given grants to attend college.⁵⁴

The Chicano Movement gained further impetus from developments involving farm workers. From the turn of the century, Mexican immigrant workers had held strikes to secure higher wages and better working conditions. A key strike began near the town of Delano, California, on September 8, 1965, led by César Chávez. The strike, which was to last for almost five years, was ostensibly provoked by the refusal of the growers to recognise the AFL-CIO Agricultural Workers' Association as the bargaining agent for farm workers. It was, in reality, the culmination of years of resentment on the part of workers for the miserable conditions they had to endure in the fields. Chávez, the son of

⁵³ Lester D. Friedman, 1991, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Carlos Muñoz Jr., 1989, pp. 50-1.

If this is true of today's North America, which at least pays lip service to the celebration of difference through the notion of multiculturalism, one can imagine the plight that faced Mexican immigrants in the early 20th century. Assimilation was undoubtedly the easiest way to secure acceptance, and the eagerness of the older Mexican generation to adapt to their new land became one of the motivating factors for the rebellion of younger Chicano activists, who wished to emphasise their distinctiveness. They enjoyed one significant advantage in their quest to forge a unique cultural identity — the United States was ripe for social change.

The early 1960s saw a move away from the conservative politics of the 1950s, both in the United States and elsewhere. The Cuban Revolution of 1959, which had such a profound effect on Latin American political development and intellectual life, symbolised the possibilities open to those who dared challenge the status quo and demand social change. Developments in the United States were crucial, moreover. The election of John F. Kennedy, a young president who spoke of new frontiers and possibilities, inspired hope in the nation. Kennedy was followed by Lyndon Johnson, another liberal. The emergence of the civil rights movement generated reform in education and politics. A fascination with ethnic history accompanied this new political openness, principally as a result of the often antagonistic Black Power Movement's activism. The concept of blending into mainstream North American culture gradually lost its importance as ethnic groups gained confidence in the assertion of their difference:

perspective took the form of accenting the superiority of those Americans whose ancestors came from the dominant “race” of northern Europe. This perspective defined the dominant core of the U.S. population in positive terms, by accenting the achievements and culture of the so-called Anglo-Saxon race.⁴⁹

Despite its limitations, the melting pot metaphor was embraced by many, among them Henry Ford, who pressed strongly for immigrant Americanisation. Perea describes a remarkable scene that involved Ford workers, who had graduated from a “melting pot” school walking through a large pot labelled “melting pot” and emerging in business suits holding U.S. flags. He interprets this literal enactment of the melting pot ideal thus: “Although this process was labeled “melting pot” assimilation, the actual model is one-way assimilation to the dominant culture.”⁵⁰ The melting-pot model has long been discredited and no longer speaks to present-day immigrants, the vast majority of whom are not from Europe but from Latin America and Asia.⁵¹ Nonetheless, the lack of tolerance for ethnic diversity is still a striking aspect of North American life, as Robert Hughes attests: “. . . considering the variety of national origins represented in their vast society, its incuriosity and proneness to stereotype can still surprise the foreigner.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Juan F. Perea, ed., 1997, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Juan F. Perea, ed., 1997, pp. 25-26.

⁵¹ Jeremy Mitchell and Richard Maidment, eds., *The United States in the Twentieth Century: Culture*, (Kent: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), p. 21.

⁵² Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 96-97.

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! Here you stand, good folk . . . in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that brothers...The real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the Crucible . . . he will be the fusion of all races, perhaps the coming superman.⁴⁸

This statement reflects the era in which the play was written and underlines the importance of time in the evolution of identity. The idea of racial miscegenation proposed here is hardly radical, given that despite different languages and histories, all the immigrants in question are from Europe. The implication also seems to be that it will not be the immigrants themselves but their descendants who will be the so-called real North Americans, perhaps because they will not carry with them distinctions of blood and rivalries but will form a homogenous society. The idealistic notion of the United States as a melting pot obscures the fact that what is proposed as the interaction of different races, in reality, could more accurately be described as conformity to ideals based on the supposed superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture. Perea underlines the pervasiveness of such an attitude:

By the mid-nineteenth century a racist perspective joined anti-Catholicism at the heart of much Anglo-American thought and action in regard to immigrants. Initially, the racial supremacy

⁴⁸ Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, 'Natives and Newcomers,' Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 126.

have highlighted the fact that the very inclusiveness of this conception of North America has led to a problematic situation where it is almost impossible to unite its diverse communities under the rubric of the nation:

“America,” as a national concept, is unusual in having come into being through the consciousness of European immigrants whose imaginaries remained closely tied to their European formations—this despite the fact that many immigrants were in revolt against specific religious or political practices and policies in their nations of origin. Europeans came to America partly to avoid the constraints of the dominant national discourse they lived within. This history partly accounts for the difficulty of peoples living in the United States to constitute themselves as a nation...⁴⁶

Despite the shared experiences of many of these immigrants, who shared common origins, they were divided by language and customs. Most importantly, the desire to leave behind the nationalistic credos of their native lands led to an attempt, despite ethnic differences, to constitute a North American identity. This effort gave rise to the idea of the melting pot, a term coined by Israel Zangwill, whose 1908 play of the same name centred on the relationship between a young Jewish itinerant musician and an aristocratic Russian, who meet and fall in love after emigrating to the United States.⁴⁷ The Russian protagonist praises his new nation in an emotional speech:

⁴⁶ E. Ann Kaplan, 1997, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Lester D. Friedman, ed., 1991, p. 53.

The positive identifier who synthesizes good and bad associations with his or her ethnic group; the ambivalent identifier who ascribed both his most valued and most despised traits to Jewishness but never resolved the conflict thus engendered; and the negative identifier who used denial, self-contempt and splitting off to achieve negative distance and to disaffiliate from his or her ethnic group.⁴⁵

The often confusing and conflictive terms of self-reference used by Mexican-Americans can only be understood in terms of their adaptation to the United States and their definition of their culture's place within U.S. society. Klein's analysis is particularly illuminating in the context of the language used by Lopez and Herrera. It appears that the terminology used by Mexican-Americans to describe their place in society has moved from the racial or geographical concerns to the area of value judgements. Oboler quite rightly points to the language used by the government as a reason for the conflicts that self-definition can lead to, but she ignores the significant role played by division between ethnic groups. Moreover, the rhetoric of North American self-identification has profoundly influenced that of minority groups in the United States.

The United States has prided itself on being a land of possibility, where people from all over the globe can enjoy the freedom emblemised by perhaps the most famous national symbol, the Statue of Liberty. Paradoxically, commentators including E. Ann Kaplan

⁴⁵ Cited in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), p. 18.

and tapping established channels of power, rather than devising new means of protest. It is tempting, therefore, to dismiss Corona's comments as merely a manifestation of the inability of an older generation to accept change. The leaders of the Chicano Movement often relied on an essentialist discourse, however, that excluded those who did not wholeheartedly embrace ideologies such as that of Aztlán, which were more mythical than historical. The idea of assimilation became highly suspect and could lead to ostracisation from Chicano society, an attitude that persists to the present day: "In Mexican-American . . . groups, for example, to be successful economically, or to participate socially with dominant-status whites, is by definition to be a "falso," a deserter."⁶³

The combination of internal conflicts and changes in U.S. society generally meant that the Chicano Movement was essentially moribund by the mid-1970s. By then, North America's unprecedented era of protest had come to an end. Chicano activism had been inspired and encouraged by other protest movements, but largely as a result of the end of the Vietnam War, these other movements faded away. The civil rights movement had reached its apogee in 1965 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act, and its power declined thereafter. The New Left, the Antiwar Movement and the Black Power Movement all but disappeared. Only César Chávez's United Farm Workers Union

⁶³ George A. de Vos, ed., 1995, p. 35.

survived, but after losing several contracts, it too was diminished.⁶⁴ Armando Navarro has suggested that the years that followed the period of widespread activism can, for Mexican-Americans, be broadly divided into two distinct eras: the Viva Yo generation, from 1975 to 1989, and the scapegoating period, from 1990 to 1996. The former period is characterised by the changes experienced in all of U.S. society at the time. There was a shift from militancy and radicalism to conservatism as politics moved from the left to right of centre. As Mexican-Americans, like other groups in society, became more moderate or conservative, their focus moved from the community to the individual:

During the years of the Chicano Movement, the activist stressed “community,” “we,” and “Raza primero.” By the late 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, their emphasis shifted to the “I.” The Mexicano/Latino community was surrounded by neoconservatism that preached self-interest at the expense of community self-determination.⁶⁵

The 1980s were shaped by Ronald Reagan, who zealously opposed immigration as new waves of Mexicans attempted to enter the United States. From 1970 to 1990, North America’s population grew by 20 per cent, with the Latino population increasing by 141 per cent.⁶⁶ This rise in the number of immigrants led to a stepped-up militarisation of the border that continued under Reagan’s successor, George Bush. His liberal rhetoric

⁶⁴ Armando Navarro, ‘The Post Mortem Politics of the Chicano Movement: 1975 to 1996,’ (University of Arizona: *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, Vol. 6, 1997), p. 54.

⁶⁵ Armando Navarro, *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, (Vol. 6, 1997), p. 56.

⁶⁶ Juan F. Perea, ed., 1997, p. 27.

notwithstanding, Bill Clinton, who succeeded Bush, imitated this conservative pattern: “Portrayals of ethnic balkanization and diversity overloads continued into the 1980s and 1990s, serving as backdrops for more rigid border enforcement.”⁶⁷ These attitudes created the second era identified by Navarro, the scapegoating period from 1990 to 1996. Bill Clinton was elected in 1992 with the support of a Democratic Congress and a platform that promised social reform, especially for the less advantaged sectors of the United States. When Congress was taken over by the Republicans in 1994, Clinton shifted his politics to a more right-wing position, however. He reneged on many of his campaign promises, among them those to the Latino population, who had been instrumental in electing him to office:

He seemed to be trying to out Republican the Republicans, especially when it came to issues such as immigration, affirmative action, welfare reform, civil rights, and English Only initiatives. Unfortunately, these were issues afflicting the nation’s barrios. As the nation prepared for the 1996 presidential elections the political climate became even more hostile toward Latinos, especially Mexicano immigrants.⁶⁸

These events underline the cyclical patterns in U.S. attitudes towards Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans. Self-serving politicians like Clinton waste no time

⁶⁷ P. Rodríguez Néstor, ‘The Social Construction of the U.S.-Mexico Border,’ Juan F. Perea, ed., 1997, p. 228.

⁶⁸ Armando Navarro, *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, (Vol. 6, 1997), p. 63.

in reversing their positions on crucial issues for the sake of political expediency. In society at large, there is continued resentment towards foreigners who are suspected of not integrating, in recent years by insisting on being taught through Spanish in high school. Affirmative action programmes also proved to be a litmus test for tolerance towards disadvantaged minorities. Rather than applauding well-intentioned efforts to encourage minority students to attend college, many North Americans saw such programmes as giving an unfair advantage to outsiders. Once again, the issue of immigration brought tensions to a head, as Mexicans were scapegoated for the country's economic difficulties.

The much-cited numerical might of the Latino population, much of which is composed of people of Mexican origin, has yet to overcome injustice and racism against these groups. Mexican-Americans have failed to participate in the electoral process in sufficient numbers to make a significant difference to their position in society, although there are signs that this may change. In 1990, an immigration act that greatly expanded the number of potential immigrants to the United States was passed. Four years later, as North America's economy declined, the tide turned and Californian voters approved Proposition 187, which sought to deny undocumented immigrants basic human rights. This punitive measure spurred the Latino community into action once more:

Clear examples of collaborative resistance are the well-coordinated public demonstrations held nationwide in 1994... Student marches and demonstrations, which mirrored the “blow-outs” by Chicana/o students in 1968, occurred frequently in the weeks prior to the California elections in 1994.⁶⁹

As this statement suggests, the 1960s continue to be a high point for Mexican-American activism. The evocation of the student marches of 1968 with reference to events in the 1990s indicates the symbolic importance of what activists in the 1960s achieved. The Chicano Movement clearly had its faults, and its paradoxical insistence on distancing oneself from U.S. society while submitting unquestioningly to the tenets of *La Raza* alienated many. Its achievements went beyond the creation of a new identity, however, as it touched all aspects of Chicano life and marked a new political unity on the part of Mexican-Americans:

The Chicano Movement ... was not simply a search for identity, nor an outburst of collective anxiety spurred by outside antagonisms. It was a full-fledged transformation in the way Mexican Americans thought, played politics, and promoted their culture. Chicanos embarked on a struggle to make fundamental political changes, and in the process they redefined their position in American society.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ David Manuel Hernández, ‘Divided We Stand, United We Fall: Latinos and Immigration Policy,’ *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, (Vol. 6, 1997), p. 85.

⁷⁰ Ignacio M. García, ‘Constructing the Chicano Movement: Synthesis of a Militant Ethos,’ *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, (Vol. 6, 1997), p. 6.

The perennial problems of immigration and the persecution of Latinos in the United States reveal that, despite the hopeful changes suggested in the *Newsweek* report with which this discussion began, North America continues to display hostility to ethnic minorities. Paradoxically, the persistence of these tensions serves to highlight the magnitude of the Chicano Movement's achievements. In the face of considerable odds, Chicano activists created a distinct identity that gave strength to the community and continues to be a source of pride. Nowhere is the importance of this identity more evident than in the field of cinema, where a predominantly U.S. medium has been combined with a Chicano perspective to grant the community a voice that could be heard outside the barrio.

Screening the Self: The Emergence of Chicano Cinema

Chicano cinema emerged as a tool for social change at a pivotal moment in both U.S. and Latin American history. It was established as the Chicano Movement gained impetus, as the New Latin American Cinema took shape and as North Americans took stock of their own identity and their attitudes to other cultures. The challenge that Chicano filmmakers took on was daunting — the creation of an alternative, oppositional cinema for cultural decolonisation and liberation. In his account of the development of Chicano cinema, *Shot In America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*, Chon A. Noriega cites an anecdote about how Chicano movie viewers would shoot their guns at the screen in the early days of film if they disliked a Western hero. Noriega concludes from this story that the task of Chicano filmmakers has been to move from shooting at the screen to addressing the nation from the screen.¹ Pre-1960s U.S. films had tended to portray Chicanos in a negative and one-sided manner. Mexican films, on the other hand, either ignored the Chicano struggle or dealt with it in a superficial manner, as Mexican critic Emilio García Riera attests:

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

¹ Chon A. Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 31-32.

significativas, trataron el tema con una frivolidad desvirtuadora e impuesta por el cálculo comercial.²

The business element of filmmaking was an important determinant in the choices made in the representation of nationality in early U.S. films. Filmmakers sought to appeal to middle-class, North American-born patrons, both to make a profit and to gain prestige for a new medium. Films therefore consciously catered to an imagined viewer who conformed to the filmmakers' expectations:

The location of theaters, the choice of subject matter, the policies with respect to attendance etiquette, and the price of tickets were all generally consistent with an industry intent on wooing a higher status audience and embracing the values of the dominant classes. Thus, the earliest films mostly catered to the dominant culture, usually the WASP power elite . . . at the expense of out-groups, which at the turn of the century included . . . Hispanics.³

It is not surprising in light of these attitudes that Mexicans or Mexican-Americans were ignored or relegated to a narrow range of film roles. The factory-like studio system's approach to film production was another factor in the marginalisation of Mexican-Americans on screen. As Gary D. Keller points out, the Hollywood formula meant that films were produced according to easily identifiable genres, such as the musical, western,

² Emilio García Riera, *México visto por el cine extranjero*, Vol.5 1970-1988, (Guadalajara: Ediciones Era, 1990), p. 16.

³ Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook*, (Tempe: Bilingual Review/Press, 1994), p. 6.

or gangster film, so that moviegoing became a kind of ritual. The repetition of genres meant that the viewer learned what to expect from certain types of stories or characters, with the result that audience participation was essentially effortless. The main thrust of these films was to provide both wish fulfillment and a model of Americanism. This combination of hedonism and nationalism was achieved at the expense of minority groups, who were invariably presented in stereotypical, negative roles:

The truly evil forces in this sort of system were the Hispanics who were “real” gangsters and outlaws, the “real” Indians, and so on. The usual components of wish fulfillment such as romance and true love, destroying evil...rewarding good, Happy Endings, and so on, assured that Hispanic and other out-group characters would perform for the assembly line the roles of vamps, seductresses, greasers, gangsters, and the like, ad nauseum.⁴

In the 1930s and 1940s, Mexican screen actors tended to play exotic characters, although their ethnicity was often mutable. The most notable example of this trend is Dolores del Río, who, as Ana M. López observes, played “ethnically vague characters with a weakness for North American ‘white/blond’ men: Indian maidens, South Sea princesses, Mexican señoritas, and other aristocratic beauties.”⁵ Del Río’s mutable ethnicity and love of white men reflect Hollywood’s problematic attitudes towards

⁴ Gary D. Keller, *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews & Resources*, (Tempe: Bilingual Review/Press, 1985), p. 25.

⁵ Ana M. López, ‘Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography and Cultural Colonialism,’ John King, ed., 1993, p. 71.

ethnic difference at this time. The melting pot theory meant that assimilation into U.S. society was far more important than maintaining one's distinctive identity. As a result, ethnicity was presented as something that was not fixed and that could be cast off at will. Nevertheless, the tendency to present foreignness through symbolic means persisted:

The basic value orientations of a Hispanic, a Jew, a black or an Asian may have been intrinsically different in another time and in another place. But in America, unique elements in these ethnically discrete value systems must be discarded if they clash with broad national values. In essence, the movies foster...“symbolic ethnicity”: actual ethnic culture values are irrelevant, but ethnic identification retains an emotional aura based on outer symbols.⁶

The relatively benign presentation of Mexican characters was motivated in large part by an effort to appease Mexicans under the Good Neighbour policy pursued by the North American government during World War II. When the war ended, U.S. filmmakers were free to present a less positive view of their Southern neighbours, a task they performed with relish. Mexican-Americans bore the brunt of this decreased sensitivity and were generally depicted in generic terms in films that followed a few basic models:

...feature films ‘about’ and ‘with’ Mexican American characters . . . ‘localize’ or delimit them to certain genres: Western conquest, social problem and exploitation films. Filmic discourses on

⁶ Lester D. Friedman, ed., 1991, p. 27.

Mexican-Americans are 'localized' to violence (and sex) within narratives aimed toward a judgment that determines the appropriate place for the Mexican-American character.⁷

The formulaic depictions of Mexican-Americans outlined above rely on settings that limit the possibilities for the realistic representation of the Mexican-American experience.

Mexican-Americans were frequently associated with stock characteristics, sexuality and violence, and even standardised physical traits. The power of these depictions depended on the audience's recognition of stereotypical characters. Stereotyping is not inherently negative, as to assign particular traits to a certain nationality is a commonplace act that does not necessarily have a pejorative connotation. This organising tendency can lead to oversimplification, however, and can act as a channel for racism or ignorance:

It is possible to turn a common categorizing mechanism into a hateful tool used by one people to segregate and ultimately dominate others...It is important to fathom how a dominant group assigns selective characteristics to other people—social, cultural, political, sexual, racial, class, and ethnic *Others*—as an ethnocentric means of underscoring differences (rather than, say, merely noting that differences exist, or simply noting similarities).⁸

The social problem type film was the most dominant in addressing the place of Mexican-Americans in U.S. society. This genre was born in the years following the Great

⁷ Chon A. Noriega, 'Internal 'Others' Hollywood Narratives 'about' Mexican-Americans,' John King, ed., 1993, p. 56.

Depression. Although it shed light on some of the less positive aspects of North American society and presented U.S. Hispanics in a more sympathetic manner than before, it still clung to the dictates of the Hollywood formula, as Keller notes:

The Hollywood conventions were that America is a series of social institutions that from time to time experience problems that, like those of an automobile, need to be tinkered with and corrected. For the most part, the films attacked such problems in order to inspire limited social change or restore the status quo to an ideal level of efficiency.⁹

Social problem films allowed their directors to play upon and expose racist expectations, but they rarely did much to truly expand the discourse on Mexican-Americans, who were always identified as the problem at the heart of the conflict that drove the action of the film. Indeed, most of these films raised racial conflicts to add drama to narratives that focused largely on the attitudes of North Americans to Mexican-Americans. These conflicts were usually settled by fist fights or legal battles. The latter category implicitly suggests the pathological nature of Mexican-Americans and asserts the supremacy and justice of the U.S. legal system: “. . . the courtroom settings of many of these films

⁸ Charles Ramírez Berg, ‘Stereotyping In Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular,’ Clara E. Rodríguez, ed., *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p. 105.

⁹ Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook*, (Tempe: Bilingual Review/Press, 1994), p. 127.

implicitly contrast the psychological deficiencies of the Mexican defendant against the success of American institutional activism.”¹⁰

George Stevens’s 1956 epic *Giant* is typical of the social problem genre in many ways, although it deals more directly with the presence of Mexican-Americans in North America and the problems they face than other films of the time. Its ambiguous presentation of its protagonist, who is identified on numerous occasions as a racist, was surely controversial in its day and would have led to dialogue on the issue. The film is ostensibly a love story that traces the relationship between a strong-minded Southern belle, Leslie Lynnton, and a rich Texas rancher, Jordan “Bick” Benedict. Its true subject is the debate on the place of Mexican-Americans in U.S. society, however.

Giant demonstrates the importance Hollywood gave to symbols, despite its ultimately inconclusive reflection on the Mexican “problem” in the film. Between 1934 and 1968, the Production Code Administration acted as the self-regulatory, institutional link between studio films and public opinion. In its evaluation of social-problem films that focused on Mexican-Americans, the PCA tried to anticipate the reaction of the Mexican government and people to possible slurs against their nation. In April 1955, a PCA representative went so far as to call attention to Spanish language errors in the dialogue

¹⁰ Clara A. Rodríguez, ‘The Silver Screen: Stories and Stereotypes,’ 1997, p. 73.

of *Giant*, citing the film's "rather touchy subject matter" as an important reason for correcting these mistakes.¹¹

Giant opens as Bick arrives at Leslie's father's ranch to buy a horse. Leslie, who is dazzled by the handsome rancher, spends the night reading about Texas. The following morning, she challenges her future husband on the legitimacy of his state:

Leslie: We really stole Texas, didn't we, Mr. Benedict? I mean, away from Mexico.

Bick: You're catching me a bit early to start joking, Miss Leslie.

Leslie: But I'm not joking, Jordan. Why, it's all right there in the history books, isn't it? This man, Mr. Austin, came down with about 300 families, it says, and the next thing you know, they're up and claiming it from Mexico.

Leslie's assessment of the dubious legitimacy of U.S. claims to the state of Texas represents the historical truth of the situation. Bick has his own truth, however. His suggestion that Leslie must be joking demonstrates his inability to question the facts of his state's troubled history. His position is that of the conqueror who can form his own view of history because the word of the victor in a battle such as the Mexican-American War is almost invariably accepted as historical fact.

¹¹ Chon A. Noriega, 'Citizen Chicano,' Clara A. Rodríguez, ed., 1997, pp. 87-88.

The debate on the place of Mexicans in the United States continues when the newlyweds arrive at the Benedict mansion and Bick chides Leslie for being too courteous to their Mexican servants. Luz, Bick's overpowering, uncouth sister, mirrors his attitude to the Mexican- American community that serves them. When they argue over Leslie's role in the household, Luz exclaims: "I know how to handle Mexicans. Doing it all my life. They'd sit on their honkers all day if I didn't keep after them." Luz's derogatory commentary on her Mexican staff further emphasises the Benedicts' lack of understanding of the rights of Mexican people. This indictment of Mexicans as lazy is a racist, stereotypical attitude that has prevailed in the Southwest from the days of the first U.S. settlers. As Noam Chomsky points out, even a poet as enlightened as Walt Whitman shared the view that Mexican lands should be taken over for the good of humanity. Whitman wrote: "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico . . . to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race." Chomsky adds that Mexicans were considered by travellers "an imbecile, pusillanimous race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country."¹² Bick shares these views, treating Mexicans as labourers who should be seen and not heard and who are intrinsically inferior to white North Americans. After Luz's death, she leaves some land to Jett Rink, who, significantly, is the only white ranch hand to appear in the film. Luz is the foil to Leslie throughout the film, and the fact that she meets her death after being thrown from

¹² Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, (London: Vintage, 1991), pp. 35-36.

Leslie's stallion, which is as independent as its mistress, seems to suggest a victory for Leslie, the heroine of the story.

Leslie becomes deeply involved with the Mexican-American community, and her attempts to improve their lives are continued by her son, Jordy, who breaks with family tradition by becoming a doctor. Jordy also makes the unconventional decision to marry Juana, a Mexican woman. Clearly, his lack of racism is attributable to the influence of his mother, who has persisted in questioning the Benedict intolerance towards the Mexican community. As Arthur G. Pettit points out, Stevens departs from his source, Edna Feber's novel *Giant*, in his depiction of Juana. In the novel, Juana is clearly Mexican, but she is not immediately recognisable as a non-American, for she is described as looking "Spanish" and being "camellia-white."¹³ In contrast, the filmic Juana is typically Mexican in appearance, a fact that leads others to treat her in a racist manner. Before a gala party at Jett Rink's hotel, Juana is refused service at the hotel's beauty salon. This incident leads Jordy to challenge Jett in front of the other guests.

When he is humiliated by losing a fist fight with Jett, his father steps in. After this episode, the Benedicts retreat to their suite, where Bick discusses Juana's humiliation with his son. More than a little pleased with himself, Bick pronounces:

¹³ Arthur G. Pettit, *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film*, (Texas: A&M University Press, 1980, p. 168.

You knew what you was doing when you married in that direction. I told you myself, the morning after you broke the news, remember? I told you then that I knew Juana was a mighty fine little gal, but when you and she got married you was asking for trouble. Remember? I told you that. There's lots of folks in this part of the country that's pretty jumpy about that sort of thing. Jett's just one of them.

At this, Jordy calls his father a racist, although their dispute soon blows over.

Significantly, the discussion of the insulting treatment that Juana is subjected to takes place without her. She is not granted a voice, even when the issue in question directly concerns her. This pattern is repeated in the film's most famous scene. Once again, Juana is the target of racist discrimination when the family stop to eat at a diner on their way home from the hotel. Then owner initially refuses to serve the party, but he is persuaded to overlook the fact that Juana and her son are Mexican because they are accompanied by their North American relatives. At first, Bick appears to ignore the racism of Sarge, the diner's owner, but when he attempts to throw a Mexican family out because of their race, Bick challenges him to a fistfight, which he loses badly. What is most notable about this scene is that again, it centres on anti-Mexican hostility, but Juana is the only character who does not comment on it. Even while the fight is taking place, the audience sees the reactions of the other family members, not those of Juana. Moreover, Bick's motivations remain unclear. He seems as aggravated by Sarge's refusal to obey a Benedict as by his racism. The music that accompanies this scene, "The

Yellow Rose of Texas,” seems to present the fight as less a matter of race than as the glorification of a good Texan. This ambiguity is underscored the next day, when Bick sits watching his grandchildren and says that Jordan looks like “a little wetback.” Leslie accepts this comment with uncharacteristic indulgence and tells him adoringly that she admired his bravery during the fight.

Giant is laudable for the seriousness with which it treats racism and the fact that it is not relegated to the background. It clearly follows the model of the social problem film, however, in its presentation of the difficulties faced by Mexicans in North America as a dilemma that is raised and then conveniently forgotten as order and peace are restored. Ultimately, the discussion on race remains the prerogative of the wealthy white oligarchs, who can choose to engage in it or not as they see fit:

As a work depicting various forms of discrimination against Mexicanos, *Giant* is certainly a Hollywood landmark; for this reason it can be appreciated for the step it took in promoting the discussion of racial issues in popular cultures...At the close of *Giant*, racial issues are ...afforded only the safe environment of private familial space. Recourse to public action appears largely stifled, especially because the final characters speaking to racism are the representatives of a wealth and power purchased through a discriminatory system.¹⁴

¹⁴ Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1995, p. 76.

The closing shot of Jordan and Leslie and Bick's other blonde, fair-skinned grandchild seems to suggest that racial harmony will be achieved in a new generation. This conclusion attempts to present racial conflict as a problem that has been solved, despite the fact that there is little evidence in the film that would lead to such a positive outcome. The shortcomings of *Giant* show how far depictions of Chicanos in film had to go, even in a film that sought to be fair in its exploration of race relations. It also revealed the importance of such issues and why they would become central to the films produced by many Chicano directors after the 1960s.

Chicano cinema has been defined as "against images of Chicanos in Hollywood mainstream and Mexican commercial cinemas."¹⁵ A more inclusive definition, which is perhaps more appropriate given the changes in Chicano film practice since its early days, has described Chicano films as by, for and about Chicanos.¹⁶ Both definitions point to the need for Chicanos to tell their own story. Frustrated by their inadequate or often bigoted representation in the media, Chicano filmmakers fought to overturn the appalling racial stereotypes that had generally characterised the filmic Mexican-American:

¹⁵ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. xxvi-xxvii.

¹⁶ Jason C. Johansen, 'Notes on Chicano Cinema,' Chon A. Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 303.

Favorite images born of prejudice and ignorance are those of the lazy, sleeping Mexican, sombrero pulled over his face; the hot-blooded Latin lover; the fat, good-natured but stupid Pancho; the insidious, black-mustachioed *bandido*; the fiery-eyed revolutionary with a pistol in each hand; the sensual *señorita* slyly lifting her skirts and whirling to the click of castanets.¹⁷

Given the wide dissemination of negative images of both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, it is not surprising that Chicano activists in the 1960s who attempted to address the place of people of Mexican origin in North America used cinema as a tool. Chon A. Noriega points out that the battle to overcome negative images of Chicanos played a decisive role in the formation of a Chicano film industry:

... stereotypes became a major site of struggle for the Chicano and other social movements, as media representation *of* the community and media use and control *by* the community began to be seen as directly related to other social causes. The focus on stereotypes led in two directions: challenges to the structure of the commercial broadcasting and film industries; and a critique of racism within modern society that identified the media as the determining form of public discourse and hence of public relations.¹⁸

This awareness of the media's power to shape group consciousness led Chicano activists to create a countercinema that focused on the difficulties faced by the community in U.S. society. A major part of the presentation of the cultural distinctiveness of Chicanos was

¹⁷ Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, p. 8.

¹⁸ Chon A. Noriega, 2000, p. 30.

the frequent reference to their shared Mexican cultural roots. The 1960s were a particularly auspicious time for the Chicano community to begin to tell its own stories on film, as the era saw a new openness and celebration of ethnic difference. Paradoxically, this new radicalism led to the creation of a subgenre of ethnic exploitation films that perpetuated negative images of Mexican-Americans:

...the 1960s and 1970s were marked by far more diversity in films but also by a group of films that featured even more serious, radically damaging put-downs of U.S. Hispanics. For example, the *bandidos*, *federales* or revolutionaries, gang members, juvenile delinquents or drug runners were now often engaged in visually explicit and gory violence. The torrid vamp *hispanas* were now engaged in R-rated loose sex with Anglo heroes or the occasional black superstud.¹⁹

Chicanos countered these images both by protesting these depictions and by creating their own images of their society. Chicano filmmaking was established as the emphasis of the Chicano movement shifted from a rural setting and the concentration on the plight of farm workers to an urban milieu. Structural changes that resulted from the combination of social protests, federal regulation and foundation initiatives also played an important role. In 1968, the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity funded a programme entitled New Communicators that aimed to train minorities for employment in the film industry. The programme, which involved intensive hands-on training with film graduates from the University of Southern California, lasted for only eight months because of internal

¹⁹ Gary D. Keller, 1994, p. 150.

conflicts. Nonetheless, it was an important part of Chicano film history, as one of the students who participated in it was Jesús Treviño.²⁰ Although Chon A. Noriega notes that two avant-garde films predate his work,²¹ Treviño is credited by most critics with making the first Chicano feature, *I Am Joaquin*, in 1969. It is based on the epic poem of the same name by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, which “envisioned a mestizo historical genealogy for the broad-based Chicano movement.”²² In the same year, Ricardo Montalbán and other Hispanic actors founded NOSOTROS, an organisation devoted to protesting the kinds of roles Hispanics were forced to play and promoting a more positive image of Hispanic culture in Hollywood films.²³ Links were also established with Latin American filmmakers. Luis Valdez first made contact with Cuban cineastes on a journey to Havana in 1964;²⁴ Jesús Treviño maintained and expanded this connection, with the result that Chicano film practice is considered an important part of the New Latin American cinema.²⁵

In the early 1970s, UCLA was a training ground for most Chicano filmmakers, many of whom produced minority public affairs shows for television to spread the message about the Chicano Movement. The national Chicano Film Festival was established in 1975, and Chicano cinema acquired its own professional body in 1978, in the form of the Los

²⁰ Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 5-8.

²¹ Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 17.

²² Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 6.

²³ Gary D. Keller, 1985, p. 47.

Angeles-based Chicano Cinema Coalition.²⁶ This organisation's main objective was to foster the growth and development of a Chicano film aesthetic that would reflect Chicano efforts to achieve equality and social justice in North America.²⁷ The work of these groups and of Chicano filmmakers did not come to the attention of the mainstream press until the box-office success of Luis Valdez's *La Bamba* in 1987. The overwhelmingly positive response to this film led to talk of a "Hispanic Hollywood," although this has yet to materialise, and there have been few commercially successful Chicano- or Latino-produced features since. Nonetheless, the critical acclaim and market popularity of the film boosted Chicano filmmaking organisations, which have provided a platform for exchange and cooperation between Chicano filmmakers and media professionals elsewhere, particularly in Cuba and Mexico.²⁸ The 1990s have seen continued activity among these groups and the release of the controversial *American Me* (1992), in which Edward James Olmos examines gang culture, and the surprise independent hit, Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* (1992).

Despite the changes in the circumstances of Chicano filmmakers and the decline of the Chicano Movement as a motivating force for cinematic representation, it is possible to make some general observations about Chicano film as a genre. Most important, perhaps

²⁴ Chon A. Noriega, 2000, p. 161.

²⁵ Chon A. Noriega, 2000, p. 145.

²⁶ Chon A. Noriega, ed., 1992, pp. 142-143.

²⁷ Gary D. Keller, 1985, p. 47.

²⁸ Chon A. Noriega, 1992, pp. 147-148.

is the unique position of Chicano film as a practice that represents a minority community caught between the dominant film industry of Hollywood and the weight of Mexican history.

Given this unique situation, it is not surprising that many Chicano films sustain an intertextual dialogue with Hollywood film. *El Mariachi* is just one example of a film that deals with a Chicano subject, life on the border, through the appropriation and reinterpretation of a Hollywood genre, the Western. A further constant in Chicano film is the frequent recourse to true stories or historical events: 'These films attempt to reclaim a forgotten past, but also choose to do so within the parameters of narrative — as opposed to documentary — cinema.'²⁹ This approach means that the films may draw on alternative forms of history telling or that they may reflect a bicultural view of history. Language is another important cultural marker in Chicano film, as the code switching of characters is often suggestive of their status or affiliation with Mexican or U.S. culture. The idea of *cine testimonio*³⁰ is also significant, both in the desire to represent Chicano experience and in the frequent presence of narrators whose commentaries shape the film. A final point that must be considered is that as an alternative cinema with often limited resources, the choices made in Chicano films can be determined by budgetary rather than aesthetic concerns. In *El Mariachi*, for instance, the character of Moco

²⁹ Chon A. Noriega, 1992, p. 153.

³⁰ Chon A. Noriega, 1992, p. 159.

delivers his lines in a monotonous manner that dehumanises him and makes him appear to be one-dimensional. This effect is not the intentional creation of director Rodriguez, however, but the result of his lack of acting experience, as Rodriguez could not afford to hire professional actors. Moco's halting delivery is also less a consequence of a desire to create a menacing character than a reflection of his poor Spanish skills.³¹

Herbert Biberman's 1954 *Salt of the Earth* and Treviño's 1977 *Raíces de sangre* are pivotal early films that deal with the Chicano condition and Chicano activism. They focus on similar stories of oppressed workers who fight for their rights. Both films are as much about cultural identity as they are about a specific text or incident. Although each was acclaimed by Chicano critics, they did not reach a wider audience, with the exception of periodic screenings at universities. Their significance in terms of Chicano film lies in the narrative patterns they established. The concentration on history, identity and the struggle to overcome societal obstacles established a model followed by other filmmakers who enjoyed greater commercial success. This debt is evident in Emilio García Riera's description of the thematic focus of Chicano films:

Esas películas...abordaron los temas de la lucha chicana, de los trabajadores ilegales de origen mexicano, del racismo y los prejuicios, del alcoholismo, de la religión, del arte chicano, de la historia de la población chicana, del bilingüismo y de la frontera, entre otros.³²

³¹ Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 49.

³² Emilio García Riera, 1990, p. 14.

One of the many remarkable aspects of Herbert Biberman's 1954 *Salt of the Earth* is that although it preceded George Stevens's 1956 *Giant*, it presents a far more nuanced picture of Chicano life. *Giant* uses the device of a socially conscious mainstream protagonist, Leslie Benedict, to introduce the plight of the 'Other,' in this case Leslie's Mexican daughter-in-law, Juana. Juana is never granted a voice and is a completely passive character whose experiences of racism serve only to throw light on the attitudes of her U.S. relatives to the marginalised position of Mexicans in their society. Even the sympathetic Leslie has a rather autocratic attitude towards the Mexicans in the film, taking it upon herself to interfere in matters such as the health of a Mexican baby in a capricious manner that does nothing to change the underlying forces that lead to unequal medical care for Mexicans. Stevens is undoubtedly well-intentioned and aware of the problems faced by the Mexican community in Texas, but his focus is on North Americans, as García Riera makes clear:

Las buenas intenciones liberales y antirracistas del realizador no dejan duda, aun entendiendo que su punto de vista es el del "anglo": los chicanos de la película parecían inermes, incapaces de reaccionar por sí mismos ante la injusticia y la discriminación.³³

³³ Emilio García Riera, 1988, p. 82.

The two films share a significant change in perspective, however. As King notes, unlike most films that deal with social problems through the eyes of a male protagonist, both *Giant* and *Salt of the Earth* “employ a feminist critique to reorient class and racial hierarchies.”³⁴ Leslie is the embodiment of East Coast liberalism in Stevens’s film, and throughout it she questions the authority of her Western husband by exposing his racism. Esperanza is both the narrator and the protagonist of the latter film, with the result that her viewpoint is privileged and her opinions seem to carry more weight than those of her husband, whose authority she similarly challenges.

Salt of the Earth is perhaps better known as a cinematic phenomenon than for its exploration of social injustice. The story of Mexican-American miners who strike in an effort to secure the same working conditions as their U.S. counterparts, it was made by a group of accomplished filmmakers who had been blacklisted during the McCarthy era. Biberman had previously directed two rather conventional films that did not betray his leftist leanings. Michael Wilson, the screenwriter, was the best-known of the crew and had written scripts for such acclaimed films as George Stevens’s *A Place in the Sun*. Biberman became infamous as a member of the so-called Hollywood Ten, however, and even served a prison term in 1950 as a result of McCarthy’s hunt for Communists in

³⁴ John King ‘Internal ‘Others’: Hollywood Narratives ‘about’ Mexican-Americans,’ John King, ed., 1993, p. 62.

Hollywood.³⁵ Wilson's script is based on a real strike, which took place in New Mexico from 1950 to 1952, by members of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. The writer consulted miners who had participated in the real-life strike; a number of them also played some of the key roles in the film. *Salt of the Earth* was never released commercially at the time because of a well-financed campaign against it by anti-Communist factions; however, it has since become a cult classic.³⁶

The film opens with a documentary-like sequence of a woman chopping wood to fuel a fire on which a large vat of water boils. The camera then pans to another area of what appears to be waste land, where she handwashes a pile of clothes. A title appears that locates the action: "Our scene is New Mexico, Land of the Free Americans who inspired this film. Home of the Brave Americans who played most of the roles." The woman's voice is heard as the camera pans from her activity to a shot of a nearby village and the mine that will be the stage for the drama that unfolds. The narrator, Esperanza, tells the history of the region as the camera tracks through the countryside around her:

How shall I begin my story without a beginning? In these *arroyos* my great-grandfather raised cattle before the Anglos ever came. Our roots go deep in this place, deeper than the pines, deeper than the mine shafts. This is my village. When I was a child, it was called San Marcos. The Anglos changed the name to Zinc Town. Zinc Town, New Mexico, U.S.A. This is our home.

³⁵ Emilio García Riera, 1988, p. 66.

³⁶ Chon A. Noriega, ed., 1992, p. 231.

The house is not ours but the flowers, the flowers are ours. My name is Esperanza Quinteros. I am a miner's wife. Eighteen years my husband has given to that mine, living half his life with dynamite and darkness. The land where the mine now stands, that was owned by my husband's own grandfather. Now it belongs to the company.

This commentary provides a succinct account of the changes in the area through history, as the Anglos appropriated Mexican land, presumably after the Mexican-American War, and even changed the name of the village. Esperanza's insistence on the deep roots of her people in the land suggests an affinity with the village that goes deeper than the law or political developments. Her heavily accented English and ironic tone when she mentions the new name of her town also point to her belonging to a Mexican society that predated the arrival of North Americans to New Mexico. It is therefore bitterly ironic that her husband, Ramón, must risk his life daily in a dark, dangerous mine to extract riches from the very land taken from his grandfather, riches that will profit not the miners but their exploitative U.S. bosses.

The importance of the subplot, the fight of the women of Zinc Town for equality, is underlined in the next scene, which is set on Esperanza's saint's day. The drudgery she endures in her daily life means that she sees no hope for the future. Despite being seven months pregnant with her third child, she must engage in heavy physical work. Her despair is such that she wishes that her child would not be born into a world as miserable as hers. Ramón is wrapped up in his problems at the mine, where the owners have

introduced a new work system that forces the miners to work alone, thereby running an even greater risk of having accidents. Far from being united by their problems, Esperanza and Ramón are divided by their separate miseries. He sees his obligations outside the home as more important than the hardships Esperanza endures because of the lack of running water in their shack. She in turn feels neglected and lonely, as she only has a radio for company at night when Ramón goes out drinking with the other men. Even this small source of comfort turns into a bone of contention, as Ramón complains about the extortionate payments the company store demands for it. The first of many arguments between the couple erupts when he grumbles that the water he washes in is cold, then says to forget it:

Esperanza: Forget it? I chop wood for the stove five times a day, every time I remember. I remember that across the tracks the Anglo miners have hot water in pipes and bathrooms inside.

Ramón: Do you think I like living this way? What do you want of me?

Esperanza: But if your union, if you're asking for better conditions, why can't you ask for decent plumbing too?

Ramón: We did, it got lost in the shop.

Esperanza: What?

Ramón: We can't get everything at once. Right now we have more important demands.

Esperanza: What's more important than sanitation?

Ramón: Safety of the men, that's more important. Five accidents this week, all because of speed up. You're a woman, you don't know what it's like up there. First we gotta get equality on the job, then we'll work on these other things. Leave it to the men.

As well as exposing the fragile state of the Quinteros marriage, this argument introduces the secondary plot of the film by exposing the pervasive cycle of exploitation in the town. The mainly Mexican-American miners endure oppressive working conditions. They are paid meagre wages, carry out dangerous work with lax safety measures, become saddled with debt because of the usurious policies of the company store and live in primitive shacks. As Esperanza and Ramón's situation makes clear, the men in turn engage in exploitation, to a greater or lesser extent, by ignoring the hardships endured by their wives and imposing a strict authority on them. This situation comes to a head when the miners decide to strike. Their precarious social position is further underlined here, as the representatives of the law, the local sheriff and his deputies, collude with the mine bosses. Significantly, the first shot of the sheriff's deputies watching the picketing miners shows them from the waist down, dissolving to focus on their weapons. These agents of the law are faceless and violent. They conspire to defeat the strike by breaking the picket line and arresting Ramón, whom they insult with racist innuendoes before assaulting him. As the strike continues, they even attempt to evict the Quinteros from their home in order to frighten them into submission.

Events take a dramatic turn when the mine owners evoke the Taft Hartley Law to force the men to stop their protest. As they will be arrested if they continue to picket, the women in the community suggest taking the men's places, thereby allowing the strike to

continue without breaking the law, which only forbids miners to strike. The matter is discussed at a public meeting attended by all. The pros and cons of the suggestion are hotly debated. Most of the women, including Esperanza, support the proposal, which is vigorously opposed by Ramón. This scene marks the film's most significant departure from previous depictions of Chicanos in U.S. films. As Keller points out, Chicanos have never before been presented as militant, articulate people with ideas of their own: "The . . . portrait of the Chicano personality does not conform to the conventional Hollywood social problem film stereotype of the noble victim seeking only to gain acceptance from the white man."³⁷ The miners are aware of their rights as workers, define their own agenda and outwit their oppressors at every turn not because of aid from a sympathetic North American but because of the intervention of the women, who take up the struggle. This shift leads to a profound role reversal, as the women move from the private space of the home to the public space of the picket line. A new confidence is instilled in the women as they thwart the sheriff's renewed efforts to break the picket line. The men, meanwhile, learn that the women's demands for sanitation are far from trivial, as they struggle to manage their households.

Once again, as the women take on new roles, Ramón embodies the worst excesses of resistance to social progress in the domestic sphere. He initially forbids Esperanza from marching, then protests when she spends more time agitating than with the family.

³⁷ Gary D. Keller, 1994, p. 133.

Moments before this, the other women have addressed what they see as the problem of Ramón's attitude and suggest that they might speak to him. The willingness of the women to comment on the relationship between the couple emphasises the interdependence of the strike plot and the subplot of female oppression. It also reveals a societal change that anticipates the women's movement in the insistence that the personal is political and that the relations between a man and his wife have an impact on society in general. The transformation that Esperanza has undergone is revealed in the couple's final argument. She refuses to back down when Ramón criticises her for what he considers to be her neglect of the family and overinvolvement in the strike:

Esperanza: Have you learned nothing from this strike? Why are you afraid to have me at your side? Do you still think that you can have dignity only if I have none?

Ramón: You talk of dignity after what you've been doing.

Esperanza: Yes, I talk of dignity. The Anglo bosses look down on you and you hate them for it. Stay in your place, you dirty Mexican, that's what they tell you. But why must you say to me "Stay in your place?" Do you feel better having someone lower than you?

The newly assertive Esperanza refuses to let Ramón hit her, then retires to their bedroom alone, telling him to sleep elsewhere. This climactic scene introduces the final confrontation between the mine owners and the Mexican-Americans. Esperanza's prediction that something important is about to happen haunts Ramón as he departs on a

hunting trip accompanied by other miners. He persuades the men to return to the village just in time to find the sheriff's men evicting his family from their property. Once more, the action of the women proves decisive, as they frustrate the eviction and the strike is won. The most important victory is the one ceded by Ramón, however. He thanks his sisters in the community for their help and echoes Esperanza's wish to rise above oppression, citing her words. The action has come full circle. The film began with an oppressed community divided amongst itself by a further layer of male-female oppression. At its conclusion, the community has attained a solidarity that allows its members to overcome external exploitation.

Salt of the Earth has been described as neorealistic because of its concentration on social injustice and the fact that it is based on a real-life incident.³⁸ In addition, there is a documentary quality to the opening scenes in particular, which introduce the protagonists through a graphic depiction of the hardships of their daily lives. The film has also attracted criticism because of its melodramatic scenes,³⁹ a point that suggests another filmic genre to which it is related, the Mexican family melodrama, described as follows by Ana M. López:

The narratives of the Mexican family melodrama deal with three principal conflicts: the clash between old (feudal, Porfirian) values and modern (industrialized, urban) life, the crisis of male

³⁸ Emilio García Riera, p. 71.

identity that emerges as a result of this clash, and the instability of female identity that at once guarantees and threatens the passage from old to new.⁴⁰

Biberman's film clearly fits this mould, as the story of the miners' struggle for the same rights as U.S. miners is reflected in their wives' efforts to achieve sexual equality. Esperanza is both the eye and the narrator of the tale that unfolds. In addition, her plight is at the centre of the film's subplot. Despite his progressive political views and activism, Ramón is an old-fashioned macho who constantly represses Esperanza. The progression of the women towards liberation is encapsulated in the many arguments that take place between Esperanza and Ramón. When Ramón raises his hand to hit Esperanza during their final argument, she pointedly tells him that this is the old way, which is no longer acceptable. As the model of the Mexican melodrama prescribes, Ramón's masculinity is threatened by his wife's increasing emancipation. Despite the changes she experiences and her decreasing passivity, she remains a rather subdued character, however, and her identity can be seen to both aid and hinder the progression towards sexual equality. The normally astute commentator John King's classification of *Salt of the Earth* as a social problem film, like *Giant*, is questionable. In a very literal sense it can be said to be a social problem film, as it deals with the issues of racism and oppression of workers. The film has far more depth than other films that deal with such issues, however. As Keller points out, the fact that the film was made outside the studio

³⁹ Chon A. Noriega, 1992, p. 231

system on a low budget meant that a more artistically elaborated interpretation of oppression is achieved.⁴¹ Moreover, it is virtually unique in privileging the Chicano point of view, a fact that King's analysis ignores:

The oft-praised *Salt of the Earth* . . . spoke more to the ex-Hollywood production team's blacklisting than to the New Mexico *hispano* community, which it portrays as *mexicano* with . . . improbable neo-indigenous nationalism. These internal distinctions, of course, are often overlooked in most films . . . since the narratives are more concerned with the opposition between dominant culture and subculture. Thus, the social problem films situated the Mexican-American character for a largely Anglo-American audience.⁴²

King's doubts about the authenticity of the portrayal of the Mexican-Americans in the film do not take into account the filmmakers' close consultations with the mining community, the fact that many of the actors were real miners rather than professional actors and the situation of the blacklisted cinematographers, who were in a unique position to understand the marginalisation of the characters they presented. His comments about the social problem film are generally accurate and applicable to films such as *Giant*, but *Salt of the Earth* cannot be categorised with these films for precisely

⁴⁰ Ana M. López, 'Tears and Desire: Women and Melodrama in the 'Old' Mexican Cinema,' John King, ed., 1993, p. 153.

⁴¹ Gary D. Keller, 1994, p. 132.

⁴² John King, 'Internal 'Others': Hollywood Narratives 'about' Mexican-Americans,' John King, ed., 1993, p. 61.

the reasons mentioned by King. Unlike other films that dealt with social problems, *Salt of the Earth* is only partly about the opposition between the dominant culture and a minority group. Its real power derives from its wider interpretation of social injustice as a matter that is not confined to the public realm but is reflected in unequal relationships among family members also.

The influential model that *Salt of the Earth* has provided in the evolution of Chicano cinema can be seen in countless films, amongst them Jesús Treviño's 1977 *Raíces de sangre*. As King notes, Treviño's film has the distinction of being the "only Chicano film ever to be financed by and shot in Mexico."⁴³ For this reason, the film has often been categorised as Mexican rather than Chicano. It is clearly a film by, about and for Chicanos, however, and it therefore merits inclusion in the history of Chicano cinema. Unlike *Salt of the Earth*, *Raíces de sangre* is not based on a real-life incident. It nonetheless chronicles events that take place every day, such as border crossings and the exploitation of workers in borderland *maquiladoras*, garment-producing factories that are owned by Americans but staffed by Mexicans or Chicanos, who work in sweatshop-like conditions. Its depiction of the work of the Barrio Unido, a community activist group, can be seen as an effort to record the history of the Chicano Movement, moreover. The film clearly strives for verisimilitude. Meticulous attention is paid to the cultural and

⁴³ John King, ed., 1993, p. 225.

social conditions on both sides of the border. Following the lead of *Salt of the Earth*, the film makes frequent recourse to code switching, especially among the Chicano characters, a device that signals authenticity. Both films share a concentration on the discussions and debates that prompt political activism, and both present Chicanos as articulate and intelligent. The women in these films are distinguished by their independence and strength rather than the fiery exoticism that had characterised Hollywood portrayals of Latinas. Other important features shared by the films are their concentration on plots that may or may not appeal to mainstream audiences and their use of Chicano or Mexican actors.

Raíces de sangre is an uncompromising film about the exploitation of both Mexicans and Chicanos by a *maquiladora* called the Morris Shirt Company on the Mexican-American border. Noriega has noted that an important function of the *mise en scène* of Chicano film is the projection for the first time of 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.”⁴⁴ Treviño fulfils this task admirably. As the camera pans through the Mexican town, located across the border from the Chicano town of Socorro, details such as a towel bearing the Kentucky Fried Chicken logo hanging on a

⁴⁴ Gary D. Keller, 1994, p. 209.

clothesline underline the extent of U.S. influence on everyday life and customs. The difficulties of living in a place that is neither truly Mexican nor North American are vividly captured. The Chicano characters speak a hybrid language that switches from Spanish to English and back mid-sentence. The frequent, bitter arguments throughout the film suggest the seriousness of the issues debated, while the proliferation of death indicates the precarious nature of human existence in these conditions.

Treviño's ambitions exceed his effectiveness at communicating a message against worker oppression at times. Alejandro Morales may be too harsh in his critique of the film:

Raíces de Sangre attempts to say too much and in doing so becomes a quagmire of themes, many of which are never developed and many of which are introduced for no logical reason. The situation the film deals with may be correctly described as complex, but what the film projects is a confusing vision of life on the Mexican-United States border.⁴⁵

A brief summation of the film's numerous plots suggests that Morales's identification of its tendency to cover too much ground is significant, however. The most obvious flaw in the film occurs in the opening scene, in which police discover an abandoned truck on the side of the road. Opening its locked back doors, they discover the dead bodies of

⁴⁵ Alejandro Morales, 'Expanding the Meaning of Chicano Cinema: *Yo Soy Chicano*, *Raíces de Sangre*, *Seguín*,' Gary D. Keller, ed., 1985, p. 128.

Mexicans who had attempted to cross the border but had suffocated after being abandoned by the driver. This strand of the narrative suggests a mystery that will be solved as the film unfolds; in fact, the incident is never mentioned again. Instead, the action moves to the *maquiladora* at the centre of the film's conflict.

Here, women sew shirt after shirt in cramped, miserable conditions, supervised by a harsh manager, Alvarado. The character of Rosa Mejías is introduced at this point, when Román, an activist who also works at the factory, asks her if she has shown his petition about the conditions at the factory to her husband, Adolfo. Rosa replies that Adolfo does not want to get involved and only wants a job, then badly injures her finger on the machine. The supervisor shows no concern for her and tells the others to go back to work. The viewer later gains an insight into Rosa's strained passivity when her home life is shown. She and her husband live in a tiny shack, where her workday begins again when she returns from the factory. They have three children, whom they leave behind when they decide to try their fortunes in the United States. They unwittingly contract with a coyote who will abandon them to die. The second main plot focuses on the character of Carlos Rivera, a Harvard-educated lawyer who does not realise how removed from his Chicano roots he has become. As he arrives at the Barrio Unido headquarters, his plan is to help the group by lending his legal expertise for the summer, before returning to San Francisco. The Barrio Unido office is run by his godfather, Rogelio, who has funded his education. A number of other workers are introduced at this

point, most notably Johnny, a worker at the Morris factory who attempts to lead an organised protest against the North American owners, and Lupe, a beautiful young woman who is devoted to the group's efforts to improve the lot of Mexicans and their fellow Chicanos in the Morris factory.

The tension between the factory owners and the workers, as well as the occasionally fractious relationships between members of the same groups, build to a climax after the Barrio Unido organises a political rally in the guise of a picnic with theatrical entertainment at the local park. The factory owner's men and the police, who again collude with the U.S. oppressors as in *Salt of the Earth*, suppress the gathering with violence, and Johnny is killed. The final scene is a melodramatic meeting of the Mexicans and Chicanos on either side of the wire fence erected by the factory owners. They unite in a silent candlelit protest that culminates in the placing of Johnny's coffin at the feet of the police and factory officials as the crowd chants "¡Que viva la Raza Unida!"

To take the plot that concerns both the Mejía family and the factory first, it is clear that the community around Socorro is deeply divided. Following the pattern established in *Salt of the Earth*, Treviño highlights the pervasive nature of exploitation at all levels in the society he depicts. At the top of the factory hierarchy are the U.S. bosses, Mr. Flint and Mr. Robertson. At an early stage, Flint instructs his manager to stifle worker activism by introducing new rules, which force the workers to produce more garments for

less money and subject them to instant firing for tardiness. Flint is one of the few characters to be shown outside the factory, the Barrio Unido office or the park. His conversation with a politician identified only as Peter takes place on a golf course, a location indicative of his wealth and privilege. This open, luxurious setting also stands in sharp contrast to the misery of both the factory and the Mejía home. The conversation that takes place emphasises the corruption of the representatives of mainstream authority in the film, furthermore, as Flint and his politician friend agree to use the police, a body that supposedly serves to protect the public, to violently suppress the Chicano rally. Flint intends to repay the favour with a contribution to his friend's campaign, thus ensuring that his own political influence will remain strong.

The corruption at the highest level of the factory hierarchy is reflected on the next level in Flint's manager, Alvarado. A brutish figure, Alvarado is utterly indifferent to the problems of the workers, although they are Mexicans like him. He is also so consumed by greed that he eagerly engages in the exploitation of his people in a more sinister manner, by taking money to arrange their transportation across the border, then abandoning them to their deaths. Despite his considerable power over the factory workers and other Mexicans, he must bow to the authority of Flint, who treats him discourteously and repeatedly questions his ability to perform his role. Alvarado is aided in his U.S.-ordered oppression of the workers by the union leader Fuentes, who does nothing to challenge even the most outrageous injustices in the factory and is similarly

more interested in money and power than in supporting his own people. The exploitation that moves from Flint to Alvarado pervades another level emblemised by the character of Rosa Mejía. Like Esperanza in *Salt of the Earth*, she is dominated by her husband, who shows her little consideration. Although Rosa supports the household with her wages, her husband seems to do nothing around the house and treats the children harshly.

At the heart of the troubles experienced by the factory workers lies a lack of solidarity. Few of them have the courage to unite and fight for their rights. Even Hilda, the unofficial leader of the Mexican workers' activism and the most vocal of the women in the factory, suspects that the Chicanos are not truly united with the Mexicans. As Johnny attempts to persuade the women to sign a petition outlining their protests, she explains the workers' lack of enthusiasm: "Ellas creen que ustedes los Chicanos nos desprecian." Ultimately, the workers unite with their Chicano counterparts and participate in the mass protest that concludes the film, but their freedom continues to be restricted. The fence that separates them from the Chicanos embodies their relative lack of autonomy, as the Chicano activists march freely but the Mexicans remain on factory land. Their demands have not been met, and they are still dependant on their oppressive bosses. The horrific demise of the Mejías suggests an even more grim reality. The couple believed that their decision to start a new life was one that they were allowed to make freely. Instead, they unwittingly became part of an enterprise far more detrimental to the Mexican population than the factory. Fregoso observes that the film "provides a stunning indictment of the

fate of immigrants in the hands of coyotes.” She also points to the role of trust in the coyote-immigrant exchange:

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. The fact that the coyotes are not subjected to any Law, but instead operate outside of legal jurisdiction, requires that we trust wholeheartedly in the individual coyote’s self-regulation and respect for human rights.⁴⁶

The shots of the protest are interwoven with shots of the locked truck, returning the viewer to the opening scene and suggesting another cycle in the film, one that involves hopelessness, exploitation and death. In a society poisoned by lack of trust, the decision to trust in the dehumanised coyote, who values money more than the lives of his people, proves fatal.

The lack of trust and solidarity evident among the Mexican community is reflected in the relationships between the Chicano characters. Carlos, the successful lawyer who returns to his roots, is the embodiment of the Americanised Chicano. He speaks in self-aggrandising terms of his time at Harvard and his life in San Francisco. Despite his desire to help his community by working at the Barrio Unido, Carlos cannot hide his superiority complex. When Lupe asks him to make copies of a pamphlet, she notices his disdain for mundane work, a fact that she comments on a later stage. Carlos’s snobbery

is further exposed in a crucial scene that pits him against Johnny, who works at the Morris factory. A car arrives at the Barrio Unido headquarters carrying Juan, a gang member who has taken an overdose. Carlos's response to the situation shows his lack of empathy for others: "When are those batos going to learn?" Johnny angrily rebukes him: "Those batos son tu raza. Y si tenemos drogadictos aquí en el barrio, es problema de todos." Carlos's dismissive reply that this issue is none of his concern further infuriates Johnny, who exclaims: "¿Sabes qué, carnal? Ya me estás cansando. No más porque eres abogado te crees la gran cosa. A ver si te vas recordando quién eres y de dónde vienes." The argument gets physical when Carlos mocks Johnny for having a poorly paid manual job. The class divisions obvious here show that Carlos's career success and integration into U.S. society have made him insensitive to the realities of life for less fortunate Chicanos. There is little doubt from the reactions of Rogelio and Lupe, who witness this scene, that their sympathies lie with Johnny. Both express their disgust at Carlos's mean-spirited attack on Johnny's social status. As Johnny has pointed out, Carlos is an outsider, despite his roots in the community, and he has much to learn before he can appreciate the problems faced by its members.

The tensions between the Chicano activists seem to dissipate as the much-anticipated rally finally takes place. Remarkably, critical analysis of *Raíces de sangre* has tended to concentrate largely on the gender politics of the film, despite its concentration on the

⁴⁶ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 85.

issues of exploitation and the relations between Mexicans and Chicanos in the border region.⁴⁷ The pivotal rally scene has been all but ignored, although the theatrical performance around which it is based sheds a great deal of light on the film.

This performance serves the same function as the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*. It both reflects and comments on the racial and social tensions in both plots, specifically the division between the Mexican and Chicano communities and the oppression of both by a North American conglomerate. Although some members of the audience carry signs protesting against the factory, the mood is relaxed and happy as they settle down to watch the burlesque show. After a song and dance routine by the Banda Calavera, the play begins. The opening sequence features a coyote and his pair of assistants, who constantly chant “Lo que es bueno para el patrón es bueno para nosotros.” A man appears holding a sign that reads “Paso del norte” and the real action begins. A Mexican, who wears a sign identifying him as “Pelado,” enters. The coyote and his men approach him, and he is encouraged by the coyote’s promises of luxuries to pay for passage to what the coyote terms “la tierra prometida.” A noose is placed around the Pelado’s neck and he is delivered to his new North American boss, a pig dressed in an Abraham Lincoln style suit with an Uncle Sam hat. The pig gorges himself on dollar bills that he pulls from a huge sack; at the mention of Mexico, he removes an enormous bill that he shares with the coyote. The pig, who is identified as the head of a multinational company, offers the Pelado a bone. When the Pelado questions this offer, he is told that it is all he ever

⁴⁷ See Sylvia Morales, ‘Chicano-Produced Celluloid Mujeres,’ in Gary D. Keller, ed., 1985, pp. 89-91.

dreamed of and reacts angrily. At this, a Chicano appears, wearing a sign that proclaims him a "Vendido." As the actors fight, calling each other names such as "agringado," "muerto de hambre" and "pendejo," chaos erupts. The crowd is stormed by armed police, Johnny is among the seriously injured and the Barrio Unido stand is burned to the ground.

The exchanges between the characters in the play provide a significant insight into the relationship between the Mexicans, Chicanos and North Americans in the film. The pig obviously represents the Morris factory owners, who have a one-way relationship with their Mexican and Chicano workers that is symbolised by the eating of the money. For these company owners, their workers exist only to provide capital through their labour and the goods they produce. The offer of the bone to the Pelado indicates the repressive conditions in which the workers operate, which have been revealed in the factory scenes. The exchange between the Pelado and the Vendido is rather more complex, for it relates to several characters in the film. The Pelado resembles the Mejías in that he pays a coyote to bring him into a situation that ends in disaster. The Chicano character's view of the Pelado as a "muerto de hambre" refers to a scene in which Johnny attempts to persuade Chicano workers at the factory to unite with the Mexican community in fighting the exploitation of the factory owners. The men call the Mexicans "pinches mojados" and say that Mexicans only want to steal their jobs. Johnny insists that this attitude is a propaganda promoted by the bosses to pit the Chicanos and Mexicans against each other

so that they blame each other rather than the real agents of exploitation for their problems: “Los patrones nada más le echan la culpa al más muerto de hambre, te digo. Y luego aquí estamos, los trabajadores de pendejos peleándonos con el muerto de hambre . . . Hasta que no nos unamos todos, siempre vamos a lucharnos el uno contra el otro.”

The Mexicans are thus identified as the most oppressed members of the society portrayed, although the Chicanos do not fare much better. Johnny has been accused by Carlos of being degraded by his position at the factory, a position that he himself would not tolerate. Carlos’s ignorance of the lack of choice faced by Chicanos like Johnny positions him as the “agringado” mentioned by the Pelado in the play. He identifies more with the U.S. aspects of his experience than with his Chicano roots. His inability to understand the plight of working-class Chicanos is underlined by the normally jovial Rogelio’s outburst after Johnny’s death: “Lo que tú no entiendes, que Johnny sí entendió, es que eso no es un juego de ahorita, eso es una lucha para toda la vida.” A final significant point about the play is that it concludes violently, as the Pelado and the Vendido struggle over the bone. This violence is mirrored in the abrupt conclusion of the rally, as the crowd is forced to flee the armed police and Johnny is killed. The juxtaposition of the final scene, a march by both the Mexican and Chicano communities, with the deaths of the Mejías heightens the atmosphere of violence in the film. The suggestion appears to be that attempts to escape the reality of oppression are dangerous and can even lead to death.

It is worth noting that the final scene of the film has been interpreted in very different ways. Fregoso suggests that the film concludes satisfactorily, as its questioning of the dominant culture's attitudes to both undocumented Mexicans and Chicanos is displaced by the unity of the groups in a recognition of their common bonds:

In many ways, the narrative closure of the film, depicting Mexicans and Chicanos in a protest march, as subjects from both sides of the border who are unified yet divided by barbed wire, interrogates the fundamental illegality, not just of human beings ("illegal" aliens) but of that very borderline constructing their illegality. The literal image of the border, where both groups confront each other with clenched fists figuratively makes visible the filmmaker's refusal of the distinction between Chicanos/as and Mexicans.⁴⁸

This may be a rather optimistic assessment of the concluding scene. The authority of the U.S. characters is very much alive as they witness the protest and still retain their power.

Morales sees the film's ending in less positive terms:

The film ends with Carlos and Lupe standing together with clenched fists raised high in protest. In this scene the border is present physically and symbolically in that the Mexican workers are separated from the Barrio Unido people by a fence. At the end of the film they are still divided. The film ends with nothing being solved. The same state of affairs as in the beginning dominates at the end. The symbolic march and raising of the fists are rendered useless gestures.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 86.

⁴⁹ Alejandro Morales, Gary D. Keller, 1985, pp. 132-133.

Both of these commentaries have merit. Fregoso rightly emphasises the film's effectiveness in identifying the common ground between Chicanos and Mexicans and the necessity of unity if they are to fight for their rights in a society dominated by North Americans. Morales's assertion that the workers remain divided is questionable, as the film has exposed the prejudices that each group holds about the other but has emphasised their efforts to overcome them. The character of Carlos is crucial in this sense, for he represents the misgivings of a successful Chicano about his origins as part of a marginalised group. Only after the death of Johnny does he come to a realisation of the problems faced by his community and he finally engages fully in the struggle by confronting the U.S. authorities. Standing in front of the factory owners and the police, he gestures to Johnny's coffin, saying: "Este es el cadáver de nuestro hermano Johnny. Obrero caído como otros del pasado y del presente. Aquí está la lucha." He finally acknowledges the truth of Rogelio's comment that the struggle is lifelong, as he equates Johnny's sacrifice with those of past activists. In the light of this realisation, Morales's desire for a neat conclusion to the film seems inappropriate. Treviño clearly establishes a cycle of exploitation, prejudice and violence that has no easy solution. Morales's reservations about the conclusion are significant, nonetheless, for the ending is problematic. The fence that functions as a symbol of authority and alienation has not been significant up to this point, and its use as a staging device is rather hackneyed. It is also difficult to see how the rally could have galvanized the Mexican community to the

extent that they are now united with their Chicano peers, given that Román was the only Mexican who seemed to have attended it. The ease with which he appears to cross the border is another discrepancy, for it calls into question the need of the Mejías to risk their lives by trusting the coyote. The unity between the groups, their return to the factory at night and the presence of the North American authorities seem rather forced and unnatural, although this combination does serve the purpose of tying up the various strands of a multifaceted story.

Perhaps the most successful aspect of this conclusion is that it points to an increased awareness on the part of each community that their suffering is intertwined, a point underscored by Carlos's heightened consciousness. *Raíces de sangre* is in many ways an unsubtle and overambitious work, but its concentration on the importance of unity and understanding between Chicanos and Mexicans is a key issue. The focus on the character of Carlos, who experiences a deep identity crisis, speaks to a concern with identity conflicts that appears constantly in later Chicano films. The prevalence of this theme points to its continued relevance to Chicano experience, as Thompson argues:

The representation of the psychological, intellectual and emotional dilemmas of the Chicano population, perhaps best characterized as a "county divided against itself," cannot be discarded: it is an essential and even mandatory task to be performed as long as there remain millions of people, in this country and abroad, who have no idea of the existence of such a thing as a Chicano population, who have no idea of this group's historical and cultural significance to the United

States, and who have no idea or understanding of the complexity of issues arising from the schism created in 1848 between the undocumented Mexican national and the Chicano within this country.⁵⁰

Raíces de sangre remains a seminal work in the history of Chicano cinema despite its flaws, for the importance of the identity conflicts it presents cannot be overstated. It is also instrumental in advancing *Salt of the Earth's* depiction of Chicano activists who do not rely on American aid in their fight for improved living and working conditions. Its chronicle of Chicano activism, particularly at a time so close to the period in which this activism was at its height, amounts to an important record of a unique era in Chicano history that had profound reverberations for both U.S. and Mexican society and cinema.

⁵⁰ Guadalupe Ochoa Thompson, 'Raíces de Sangre: Roots of Lineage, Sources of Life,' Gary D. Keller, ed., 1985, p. 138.

Beyond the Frontier: Chicano Border Films

Through the many changes in U.S. cultural history, from the notion of the melting pot to the current recognition of cultural difference, the border has continued to fascinate. The border that divides Mexico and North America is a physical marker of the profound dissimilarities between the people who make up each nation. One sign of just how wide the difference between these nations is can be seen, ironically, in the fact that for many North Americans, the crossing of boundaries suggests a movement from East to West. Richard Rodriguez, in an essay that examines his own confusion growing up in California the son of an immigrant father who still referred to their new home as *el norte*, reflects that: "American myth has traditionally been written from east to west, describing an elect people's manifest destiny."¹ The notion that North Americans are a chosen people whose mission is to conquer wilderness and, if necessary, subjugate native peoples to advance the course of what they consider to be civilisation was enthusiastically taken up by historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner's 1893 essay 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' is still widely read. He describes this desire for expansion in glowing terms and proposes that it is a defining force in North America's formation of a national identity:

¹ Richard Rodriguez, 'True West: Relocating the Horizon of the American Frontier,' *Harper's Magazine*, (September 1996), p. 37.

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.²

For North Americans, the frontier is a symbol of possibility, its constant expansion mirroring their ambition and drive. The primitive society mentioned by Turner is subjugated to the more important force of U.S. character, which constantly evolves as it changes the landscape it inhabits. It is interesting to compare this unreservedly positive account of crossing boundaries to modern narratives, such as the fictional encounter between a Californian and a Mexican in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*. The novel chronicles the growing antagonism between "Delaney Mossbacher, of 32 Piñon Drive, Arroyo Blanco Estates, a liberal humanist with an unblemished driving record and a freshly waxed Japanese car"³ and an illegal Mexican immigrant, introduced simply as Cándido. The story follows Delaney's struggle to maintain his image of himself as a nonracist liberal after a car accident brings Cándido into his life and he is forced to confront the reality of the undocumented immigrants all around him. Despite himself, his reaction to the border is one of revulsion:

² Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), p. 4.

³ T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 3.

The borders. Delaney took an involuntary step backwards, all those dark disordered faces rising up from the streetcorners and freeway onramps to mob his brain, all of them crying out their human wants through mouths full of rotten teeth.⁴

These texts suggest the divergence between the optimism conjured up by the image of the frontier and the horror evoked by the border in the U.S. psyche. The nightmarish images associated with crossing the border suggest the desirability of keeping out foreigners who will make demands on North American citizens like Delaney. The frontier is a symbol of the mythic West that is central to the image of U.S. pioneers as trailblazers overcoming savagery to impose order and civilisation. The border, conversely, is nothing but a barrier designed to keep Mexicans and other Latin Americans from becoming a burden on the United States. George J. Sánchez reflects on the disparity between the two:

The international border . . . implies a dual vision, that of two nations looking at each other over a strip of land they hold in common. It acknowledges that at least two distinct peoples meet in this region, neither having the certain destiny of cultural and military superiority and with conflict being an ever-present historical possibility. While “frontier” evokes an image of expansive possibilities, “border” speaks to what is real and limiting between nations and peoples.⁵

⁴ T. Coraghessan Boyle, 1996, p. 101.

⁵ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, 1993, p. 38.

Sánchez's distinction between the frontier and the border is significant, for it further underlines the differences between Mexicans and North Americans. The power to legislate about the border is clearly on the side of North Americans, who are unrestricted in their movements across it but have persistently attempted to deny Mexican immigrants entry into the United States. Immigration is an ancient social pattern that has continued into the 21st century and has led to attitudes not dissimilar to that of Coraghessan Boyle's protagonist towards Mexicans. There are, of course, many different types of borders, whether geographical, social, legal or moral. A key point to note, as Juan Perea does, is that borders are artificial, manmade constructs that result from historical choice and social conditioning:

Nation-state boundaries are social constructions. They do not exist independent of our volition. With the exception of insular countries, they usually do not mark any significant topographical change in the surrounding land mass. Nation-state borders exist primarily because state governments agree, voluntarily or through coercion, that they delimit political divisions. Solemn treaties formalize international boundaries, but it is the daily reproduction of ideas and myths that socially constructs borders. One idea is that international boundaries are *essential* dividers between areas of different social qualities.⁶

⁶ Juan Perea, *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, 1997, p. 223.

Perea's reflection on the nature of the nation-state border highlights the desire for a concrete realisation of difference between societies. As he suggests, internal borders can be as significant as external, physical ones. The historical background to the border separating Mexico from North America has involved a great deal of trauma for Mexicans, who became an unwelcome minority in their own land overnight as a result of political machinations. The fraught history of the border has also led to great difficulties for Mexican immigrants, who are welcomed when North Americans need their labour but are brutally kept out in times of economic hardship. The imposition of legal barriers to keep immigrants out when they are not needed to provide cheap labour points to North America's unwillingness to take responsibility for an economic exploitation largely of its creation. It also reveals the expendability of Mexican immigrants, who are viewed not as human beings with the right to pursue their dreams of success in a new land but as elements in an economic plan, a reality underlined by Noam Chomsky in his discussion of NAFTA:

The guiding doctrine is straightforward: profit for investors is the supreme human value, to which all else must be subordinated. Human life has value insofar as it contributes to this end. As the economy becomes globalized, living and environmental standards can be "harmonized" globally, but harmonized down, not up.⁷

⁷ Noam Chomsky, *World Orders, Old and New*, (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 162.

Immigrants are dehumanised by the U.S. capitalist system, which treats them with indifference if they are productive but with severity if they are no longer a useful part of the market. Economic factors are perhaps the least important reason for the existence of borders, however. By far the most common justification for the existence of borders is national security, as outsiders are perceived as a threat to the fabric of U.S. society. Perea expands on this xenophobic outlook:

National security is seen as essential for national sovereignty and the public order, hence governments have the right to control the entry of people from other countries. According to this perspective, unrestrained entry through the U.S. southern border endangers the existence of basic social, cultural, and political institutions, and thus the very “American way of life.”⁸

This emphasis on the pernicious nature of foreign influence leads us back to Turner’s glorification of the frontier. His exhortation to move through the land and conquer it is clearly limited to North Americans, as the movement of Mexicans into the United States is so undesirable that it is made illegal through the imposition of a physical barrier. The difficulties that undocumented workers are forced to endure in their attempts to cross the border are harrowing. Immigrants run the risk of exploitation by coyotes, as *Raíces de sangre* powerfully demonstrated. The harsh terrain of the borderlands poses numerous

⁸ Juan Perea, 1997, p. 227.

threats, as does exploitation by North Americans who cash in on the Mexican desire to cross the border, whatever the cost. Chomsky writes:

Mexicans continue to flee to the United States for survival, and here . . . macabre tales abound. The Mexican press reports drownings, disappearances, and “the disappearance or theft of women for the extraction of organs for use in transplants in the U.S.” (quoting a regional Human Rights Committee representative). Others report torture, high rates of cancer from chemicals used in the maquiladora industries (assembly plants near the border, for shipment to US factories), secret prisons, kidnappings, and other horror stories.⁹

The trauma induced by such physical hazards amongst the immigrant population cannot be overstated. The external, obvious hardships involved in crossing undetected are reflected in the less evident psychological toll paid for migrating to a completely foreign society, as Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco attest:

Although migration may bring about an improvement in economic conditions, it also ruptures the “immigrant’s supportive interpersonal bonds” . . . well recognized to be crucial for psychological well-being. In addition, migration may psychologically represent a cumulative trauma. It often results in multiple losses, the effects of which are not always immediately apparent.¹⁰

⁹ Noam Chomsky, 1991, p. 225.

¹⁰ Carola and Marcelo Suárez Orozco, ‘Migration: Generational Discontinuities and the Making of Latino Identities,’ George de Vos, ed., 1995, p. 332.

This commentary points to the profound sense of loss experienced by the immigrant, who has left behind a community that offered support and a feeling of belonging and must put aside his longing for his own country in an effort to adapt to an entirely different culture in which he is not welcome and is legally classified as an “alien.” A further pressure is brought to bear by the need to conform and to simulate belonging to the dominant U.S. culture. This need to adopt different customs or a different style of dress does not automatically mean that one abandons one’s own culture, a point stressed by Thomas Sowell: “Cultures are not erased by crossing a political border, or even an ocean, nor do they necessarily disappear in later generations which adopt the language, dress, and outward lifestyle of a country.”¹¹ Sowell’s distinction between the outward assimilation of recently arrived immigrants and that of more established immigrants is telling, however. A fundamental paradox of immigration is that Mexicans who cross into North America are often subjected to racist treatment because of their difference from the mainstream, while Mexican-Americans who have become part of U.S. culture do not see these recent arrivals as their peers but as a threat or an embarrassment because of their lack of integration.

Borders are not altogether successful as barriers, of course. The sheer extent of the terrain traversed by the border between Mexico and North America means that it cannot be a completely effective means of keeping immigrants out, as Gilbert Paul Carrasco

¹¹ Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A Worldview*, (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), p. 4.

observes: "The border between the two countries stretches for two thousand miles and is marked in some places by a fence, but at most points merely by an imaginary line in the sand or by the Río Grande River."¹² As a consequence of the permeability of the border, Mexican emigration is often circular, with Mexican men from impoverished regions of their country participating in seasonal labour in North America and returning home with their wages. While this coming and going enriches North America's economy, Mexican immigrants frequently endure miserable or dangerous working conditions, while the threat of deportation looms constantly. Racism taints the experience of Mexican-Americans who have made a life in the United States, meanwhile, to the point where they in turn disparage newly transplanted Mexicans.

In light of the paradoxes and hardships evoked by the border in the minds of Mexicans or Mexican-Americans, it is hardly surprising that Hollywood's use of the border as a cinematic emblem has provoked strong reactions on the part of Chicano critics. The desire to maintain the border as protection against the nefarious influence of the South is well articulated by Gary D. Keller in his analysis of the function of the border in U.S. film: "From the very earliest times, the 'border' came to be associated with all forms of violence. It was a zone in which anything could, and would take place, a place free from

¹² Paul Gilbert Carrasco, 'Latinos in the United States: Invitation and Exile,' Richard Delgado, ed., 1998, p. 77.

the responsibilities and restrictions of North American law.”¹³ This interpretation of U.S. cinema’s representation of the border is undoubtedly true up to the 1960s, but after this time, filmmakers recognised that their presentations of the border needed substantial rethinking. The dawn of political correctness brought John Sturges’s *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), a revisionist Western that featured a gang of U.S. cowboys, who were employed by poor Mexican villagers to defeat their Mexican oppressor, the ruthless Calavera. Every effort is made to present the villagers as noble people whose pacific natures make them easy targets for the evil Calavera. The film is ultimately patronising, however, and presents the Mexicans as rather pathetic, childlike figures who are utterly dependent on their U.S. saviours. What it more, the storyline implicitly sanctions North American intervention in Mexico, presenting it as well-intentioned and beneficial to both nations, as U.S. military and tactical superiority prevails. In the end, *The Magnificent Seven* differs little from more conventional Westerns, a fact that Michael Coyne emphasises in his analysis of the revisionist Western: “The Hollywood Western still constructed American national identity in white and male terms, and remained chiefly preoccupied with homegrown components of American experience.”¹⁴ Idealised narratives such as *The Magnificent Seven* did little to advance cinematic portrayals of Mexican life for the reasons outlined by Coyne — the protagonists were North American,

¹³ Gary D. Keller, 1994, p. 84.

¹⁴ Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1998), p. 106.

not Mexican, and the plight of Mexicans, even when dealt with sympathetically, remained peripheral.

The border continued to inspire U.S. directors into 1986, when Jon Landis's *Three Amigos!* was released. Keller dismisses the film as "a simplistic comedy" that "attempts to parody stereotypes but is only occasionally successful."¹⁵ The film centres on a trio of washed-up actors, known as the 'The Three Amigos.' They are so dull-witted that they misinterpret a genuine call for help from a persecuted Mexican villager, whose people are oppressed by the villainous El Guapo, as an invitation to perform a show. The film is not just a parody of stereotypes but a satire of *The Magnificent Seven*. The noble heroes of the earlier film are replaced by cowardly braggarts who only triumph over El Guapo through improbable good fortune. The North Americans are such clownish figures that although the film does not present the Mexican characters in a completely sympathetic light, neither can it be taken as a racial slur. As Keller suggests, the film clearly sets out to overturn stereotypes, a hazardous enterprise that is not altogether realised. Keller's measured reaction to the film is not typical of Mexican or Mexican-American reactions to it, however. David R. Maciel can scarcely contain his rage as he comments:

What begins with much promise as a parody of traditional westerns quickly degenerates into fierce clashes, degrading stereotypes, and a disturbing portrayal of Mexican characters, women, and the

¹⁵ Gary D. Keller, 1995, p. 175.

border. The accent of comedy in *The Three Amigos* is again humor at the expense of the Mexican-origin characters. They are either poor, helpless, defenseless, passive individuals who need to be saved by the clever, brave, strong Anglos, or they are no match against “The Three Amigos.”¹⁶

Maciel’s anger is misplaced. He overlooks the film’s constant references to *The Magnificent Seven*, which, although it is essentially a traditional Western, tries to be revisionist. It is this political correctness, not Mexico, that *Three Amigos!* targets. Furthermore, the bumbling U.S. protagonists can hardly be described as brave or strong and are certainly not clever. Maciel’s impassioned reaction to the film should not be discounted, nevertheless. His aversion to the film suggests the strong feelings that representations of the border provoke, a reality underlined by the fact that *Three Amigos!* was banned by the Dirección General de Cinematografía in Mexico.

The many resonances of the border in Chicano consciousness mean that it has been a key trope for Chicano filmmakers. The border’s multiple meanings have proved to be a rich source of inspiration for Chicano filmmakers, as Rosa Linda Fregoso points out in her discussion of *Born in East L.A.* and *La Bamba*:

There are multiple ways of applying the concept of border in a study of Chicano and Chicana cinema, just as there are various manners in which Chicano films have themselves deployed borders . . . *Born in East L.A.* and *La Bamba* depict an alignment of multiple senses of the concept

¹⁶ David R. Maciel, ‘The Border According to Hollywood,’ Richard Delgado, ed., 1998, p. 224.

of borders, including the physical border . . . the spatial movement of border crossing, and border crossing as the mixing of cultural forms and subjectivities.¹⁷

As Fregoso acknowledges, the border is not approached in a narrow manner by Chicano filmmakers but is employed as an emblem of the complexities and diversity of Chicano experience. The films that are discussed in this chapter are indeed very different. *El Norte* (1983) is a traditional border-crossing narrative that focuses on the experiences of two Guatemalan immigrants to the United States. *Born in East L.A.* (1987) is a comedy that explores the precarious nature of Chicano citizenship, and *El Mariachi* (1995) is a violent postmodern western set in the borderlands. All three films are set on the Mexican-American border and reflect on its meaning, however. They cannot be considered frontier films, for they lack the celebratory tone of such U.S. films and generally concentrate on the hardships endured by border dwellers rather than on the possibilities brought by expansion. Although the three films differ greatly in tone and style, they can nonetheless be considered a subgenre called the border film. Apart from their focus on the border, they share several other elements. The border is presented as a multifaceted phenomenon that has numerous interpretations. All place great emphasis on the family and on identity. Another constant in border films is the deep ambivalence displayed towards North America. Finally, they display thematic and narrative

¹⁷ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 67.

similarities, and they attempt to examine the frequent culture clashes that arise in the course of the stories they tell.

Gregory Nava's *El Norte* features a border crossing from Mexico to the United States, as Ernesto and Rosa, a brother and sister from Guatemala, flee political oppression and attempt to build a new life. The film's narrative is fragmented, as it is divided into three separate episodes entitled "Arturo Xuncax," "Coyote" and "El Norte." Each of these episodes marks a spatial movement, beginning in the village of San Pedro, where Ernesto and Rosa live with their parents. Life in this indigenous community is portrayed as idyllic. Social interaction centres on the village square, where couples stroll and listen to harp music. In the private sphere, familial relationships are harmonious and supplemented by close bonds with an extended family circle, and a strong sense of social cohesion is communicated. The villagers speak a mixture of Spanish and Quiché and dress in traditional clothing, with the women's dress being particularly decorative and colourful. There is a sense that the community is self-sufficient and untouched by modernity. Rosa's mother painstakingly prepares tortillas, while Rosa washes clothes by hand in the river and carries water on her head in an earthenware jar. Even courtship takes place within the safe confines of the home, as Rosa receives her boyfriend by chatting to him through the bars of her bedroom window. The illusion of an earthly paradise is shattered by events outside the home, however. Rosa's father, Arturo, and Ernesto make a living by picking coffee beans watched over by armed guards. In

response to their ill treatment, they attempt to organise against the outsiders who have taken their land, but they are betrayed by a fellow villager and attacked by soldiers. Ernesto kills a soldier in self-defence after going to find his father, whose severed head hangs from a tree. The violence escalates as the troops round up most of the remaining inhabitants of the village and take them to an unknown location. With their father dead and their mother gone, Rosa and Ernesto realise that their lives too are in danger. With the help of their godmother, who gives them her life's savings, they venture to *el norte*. Despite the graphic violence used to communicate the persecution of the villagers by outside forces, little indication of the background to these events is given, as John King points out:

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.¹⁸

The events alluded to by King took place in response to the 1952 land reform programme, through which a constitutionally elected government gave 400,000 acres of uncultivated land to impoverished peasants. This move proved to be controversial because most of the land was owned by the Boston-based United Fruit Company (UFCO). UFCO had close contacts in the government and the military, which it did not hesitate to use to press its case. With U.S. backing, Castillo Armas took power in 1954

and immediately returned the lands to the fruit company. A 30-year horror followed in which almost 100,000 people died, 40,000 disappeared, 500 Indian villages were destroyed, and 1 million Guatemalans became refugees.¹⁹ U.S. intervention did not stop at defending the interests of UFCO, for U.S. companies rushed to invest in Guatemala after the 1954 coup. There were many advantages to these investments, as James D. Cockcroft observes:

For years these firms enjoyed extremely high rates of profit. Labor unions were practically nonexistent and wages were low. If trouble occurred, it was snuffed out by the military, the police or death squads under their command. U.S. bankers acknowledge they made loans to businesses led by death-squad supporters. A U.S. Embassy report in 1981 encouraged new investors by announcing that the Guatemalan government permitted "full repatriation of earnings and payment for all imports without exception."²⁰

The film's lack of elaboration on the political and economic circumstances behind the massacre depicted means that the reasons for Ernesto and Rosa's flight remain rather puzzling. This omission may also run the risk of presenting Guatemala, a country with a very particular history of oppression, as a generically troubled Central American nation. More importantly, the direct responsibility of North America for this turmoil is ignored, as Richard Allen argues:

¹⁸ John King, 1993, p. 100.

¹⁹ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, pp. 103-104.

²⁰ James D. Cockcroft, 1989, p. 105.

What is the relation between right-wing death squads in Central America, the situation of Latino minorities in Los Angeles and the border question? Clearly, all are reflections, whether explicit or covert, of the historical dominance of American capital and American imperialist ideology in the western hemisphere, which is sustained by the exploitation of labour from, and the exploitation of markets in, the third world. The film both trivialises and avoids these central issues.²¹

These misgivings aside, the first section of the film skillfully conveys the idea of an almost fairytale community from its opening shot, when the camera pans through a misty rainforest to the strains of pipe music. The fact that the peace conveyed here is disrupted by sudden, unexplained violence serves to heighten the contrast between the serenity of the initial *mise en scène* and the bloody aftermath, as Bernard Nave attests:

... Gregory Nava construit un film très personnel. Tout d'abord, il rejette tout misérabilisme, cherchant même à donner une vision poétique de la vie dans le village. Les paysages, les vêtements, les visages, tout concourt à magnifier une certaine harmonie malgré l'exploitation dont sont victimes les paysans. En un sens, cette vision renforce le caractère sauvage et arbitraire de la répression qui s'abat sur eux.²²

²¹ Richard Allen, 'El Norte,' *Framework*, (No.26-27, 1985), p. 88.

²² Bernard Nave, 'El Norte,' *Jeune Cinema*, (No.166, April 1985), p. 44.

As well as underlining the trauma endured by Ernesto and Rosa, whose family and home are destroyed permanently, the disparity between the tranquility of their former lives and the violence that ruptured them anticipates the difficulties they will endure as they attempt to reach North America. The contrast between their lovely village and the squalor of the border town of Tijuana could not be more extreme. This dramatic change is accompanied by a radically different style of cinematography. The lyrical shots and ambient lighting of the Guatemalan sequence are replaced by bright, harsh lighting in the Mexican scenes. As Ernesto and Rosa descend from the bus that has taken them on the final leg of their long journey, they are surrounded by opportunistic hustlers who promise them passage to the promised land of North America. The comments of the hustlers are illustrated by an inventive montage composed of single shots that juxtapose pictures of houses representing the paradise suggested by the American Dream with images of shacks in Tijuana. The most striking part of this second episode is the border crossing itself, which takes the form of a horrifying journey through a disused sewer full of rats. The sheer length of this scene, which lasts for almost ten minutes, draws the viewer in so that the claustrophobic, stifling atmosphere of the sewer is powerfully conveyed and identification with the protagonists intensifies. This arduous journey damages Rosa physically, and she ultimately dies of typhus contracted through rat bites. The crossing is also seen to have a similarly detrimental effect on Ernesto, who becomes dazzled by the promise of the American Dream and begins to devalue his relationship with his sister.

The final segment of the film, which finds the brother and sister in Los Angeles, again opens with a visual rendering of the difference between locales. The cityscape is seen at night, with its glittering lights and tall skyscrapers suggesting a developed, sophisticated space completely different from either the Guatemalan or Mexican settings. Although Rosa and Enrique are fortunate enough to find a friendly coyote who organises their crossing, even he is part of a cycle of economic abuse. When they arrive at the Lazy Acres Motel, which is run by the grasping Don Mote, the coyote is paid for delivering them. Don Mote in turn profits by taking a share of their wages as rent for the filthy accommodation he provides. The lack of solidarity evident here mirrors the exploitative attitude of North Americans to recently arrived immigrants. Rosa narrowly escapes the immigration police on her first day of work at a factory, thanks to the kind-hearted Nacha, with whom she decides to clean houses. The marginal position of undocumented immigrants is underlined when Nacha takes Rosa to lunch and Rosa comments on the absence of North Americans in the neighbourhood around them. Nacha responds incredulously that they do not want to live amongst Mexicans and instead inhabit a separate world, which is revealed when the pair find work in a luxurious, appliance-filled U.S. home. Nacha also instructs Rosa on adapting to American society and buys her U.S.-style clothes so that she will look less foreign. Ernesto's reaction to this transformation is less than enthusiastic, and he comments "Pareces payasa." Rosa is defiant, however. Proud of the trappings of her new culture, she replies "No, parezco gringa." Rosa's transformation and even her desire to assimilate further by learning English remain

outward changes, however. She is consistently identified with her Guatemalan culture through flashbacks of her mother and the village, and she is baffled by the growing distance between herself and her brother, who prefers to spend time with his new acquaintances.

In his first days in the United States, Ernesto learns some harsh truths about the position of immigrants from the streetwise George, who works in the same elegant restaurant as him. George mocks a Chicano bus boy called Carlos, calling him a pocho, to Ernesto's incomprehension:

Ernesto: ¿Y qué es un pocho?

George: Es un Chicano.

Ernesto: ¿Cómo, Chicano?

George: Pues es ciudadano Americano, pero tiene familia que viene de Mexico. Por eso tiene que hacer la misma mierda de trabajo que nosotros.

This exchange leads to the clearest illustration of the minefield of cultural assimilation portrayed in *El Norte*. Provoked by envy when Ernesto is promoted instead of him, Carlos calls the immigration police; both Ernesto and George are forced to flee the restaurant, thus losing their jobs. Ernesto, spurred on by George's reflection that a green card is the only way to have security, decides to take a job in Chicago that he had previously refused because he was not allowed to take Rosa with him. This job brings

with it the promise of the green card he so desperately needs. He is unaware at this point that Rosa is seriously ill and has been taken to hospital. When Nacha finds him and urges him to visit Rosa, who may die, he refuses and explains that he must go to Chicago to take up his job. This reaction is less cold-hearted than it may appear, in light of the fact that the scene in which Ernesto realises the importance of having a green card is intercut with scenes of Rosa's experience at the hospital, where she is treated coldly by a nurse who demands her green card. Nacha responds angrily to Ernesto's apparent lack of concern for his sister, however, saying: "Rosa se puede morir, pero tú ya estás muerto." This assessment is essentially accurate. Ernesto has lost sight of the importance of his bond with Rosa, his only surviving family member, and he cares more about financial and legal security than about her welfare. In the end he relents and witnesses Rosa's dying words, which draw the three strands of the film together. She despairs at their situation and the hardship of life for people who have no place of their own: "En nuestra tierra no hay lugar para nosotros, nos quieren matar . . . En Mexico sólo hay pobreza, tampoco hay lugar allí para nosotros. Y aquí, en el norte, no somos aceptados, pues." After Rosa's death, Ernesto is utterly alone. The closing scene sees him competing for a job that involves hard physical labour before the camera cuts to a shot of the decapitated head of his father. Richard Allen has criticised *El Norte* for replicating the model provided by Hollywood cinema, saying that it is:

... a story that progresses in a linear fashion through a sequence of events, which the spectator experiences vicariously through identification with central characters. While the subject matter of EL NORTE would never be considered by a Hollywood studio, it seems to me, nevertheless, that the way the story is told militates against the wider social and political issues at stake.²³

In fact, the story is not told in a conventional Hollywood manner. It perhaps resembles a Hollywood film in its identification strategies and its melodramatic touches, but the film employs an imaginative structure, signalled not only by the use of three separate titled chapters but also by the use of flashback and mythic symbolism. The final sequence provides one example of the film's use of cyclical rather than linear time. Long before Ernesto journeys to North America, his father warns him that peasants are valued only if they have strong arms and that no consideration is given to their feelings. Ernesto secures his labouring job by holding out his arms to show their strength. The juxtaposition of scenes depicting his back-breaking labouring with an image of his father's disembodied head seems to suggest that his father's physical death is akin to the spiritual death that Ernesto has experienced through the dehumanising treatment he is subjected to as an immigrant. The camera thus cuts across the border between different periods of time, emphasising the weight of past events on the present. *El Norte* also makes frequent recourse to mythic motifs. When Rosa leaves San Pedro, for instance, she crosses an animal skull, which as Rosa Linda Fregoso suggests, presages her own

²³ Richard Allen, 1985, p. 88.

death at the film's conclusion.²⁴ Although many of these motifs remain oblique to viewers unversed in Mayan lore, they point to an alternative consciousness and way of imagining the world completely at odds with the selfishness and consumerism that entrap Ernesto.

El Norte's greatest strength is its powerful depiction of the hardships involved in immigration and of the alienation felt by undocumented immigrants whose worth as individuals is ignored by the ruthlessness of the U.S. legal and economic systems. Its emphasis on the humanity of the central characters and concentration on their viewpoints are significant developments in the cinematic presentation of the problematic nature of immigration, moreover.

Born in East L.A., which won first prize at the Havana International Film Festival in 1987, represents another milestone in Chicano cinema. It is the first major commercial border film to have a Chicano, Richard 'Cheech' Marin, as its writer, director and protagonist.²⁵ The narrative follows the adventures of a Chicano mechanic, Rudy Robles, a third-generation native of Los Angeles. His mother asks him to collect his Mexican cousin, Javier Robles, at a toy factory, an event that seals Rudy's fate. He is caught up in an immigration raid and deported to Mexico as an illegal alien. Despite his fluent English, Chicano appearance and insistence that he is a U.S. citizen, he is considered

²⁴ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 109.

Mexican. Lacking identification documents and with his family out of town, he has no one to turn to and is forced to confront the experience of 'real' illegals, the crossing of the border. The remainder of the film concerns his desperate attempts to earn enough money to return home. He works for a North American opportunist called Jimmy and meets Dolores, a woman from El Salvador with whom he forms a relationship. Finally, he, Dolores and many other immigrants storm the U.S. border patrol and return to East L.A. as the Cinco de Mayo festival takes place.

Marin's film is far from solemn, despite his serious theme. Before making *Born in East L.A.*, Marin had a successful career as a comedy actor and codirected several films, such as *Up in Smoke* (1978), with his partner, Thomas Chong. These films portrayed the duo as idle dope users and centered on parodies of various ethnic or racial groups in California.²⁶ Marin's solo debut drew on his former cinematic experience by using humour as a weapon, as he acknowledges in a 1988 interview:

I believe that important subjects can be dealt with as entertainment. . . throughout film history, comedians have often been the first ones to bring issues to the public. Underneath that mask of humour, a lot of comedians are moralists, because it's easier to get somebody to look at a problem if they can laugh first and think later.²⁷

²⁵ David R. Maciel, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., 1998, p. 225.

²⁶ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 49.

Although Marin points to an important shift from his previous work in his effort to reveal serious issues through comedy, it is to his credit that he does not tone down the bawdy humour that marked his earlier cinematic output. Instead of presenting Rudy as a saintly character who is instantly sympathetic, Marin portrays him as a rather ambivalent figure. As the narrative action begins, Marin is heard singing the film's eponymous theme song. The camera pans through the Los Angeles cityscape, from skyscrapers, which denote public space, to the domestic space of a neighbourhood and a well-kept, attractive house that is revealed to be Rudy's home. Rudy's belonging to this city is underscored both by the repetition of the lyric "Born in East L.A." and by the visual emphasis on his home's place in a community.

This opening scene is significant not just in establishing Rudy as part of Los Angeles culture but in overturning stereotypical presentations of Chicano neighbourhoods, as Noriega comments:

. . .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, drug deals and so on that signify problem space. In essence, East L.A. is identified as an appropriate location for the American Dream.²⁸

²⁷ Dennis West and Gary Crowdus, 'Cheech Cleans Up His Act: An Interview with Richard 'Cheech' Marin,' *Cineaste*, (Vol. 16, No. 3, 1988), p. 37.

²⁸ Chon A. Noriega, 'Waas Sappening?: Narrative Structure and Iconography in *Born in East L.A.*,' *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, (Vol.14, 1995), p. 111.

The dual identity of the home is revealed in the North American setting and style of its exterior and the recognizably Chicano atmosphere inside. The occupants of the house are 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, as she tells her son that she has rented the house across the street and asks him to lodge the money. Rudy displays considerable ambivalence towards his Mexican heritage at this point in the film. Although he and his mother have an affectionate relationship, the generational divide between them is clear. Instead of appreciating the religious significance of the garish picture of the Crucifixion his mother proudly displays, Rudy is concerned that it is blocking the telephone, a symbol of his reverence for modern technology over spirituality. He is also derisive of his cousin's inability to speak English and flippant in his attitude to his illegal status. When his mother tells him to ask for Javier Robles and says that there cannot be that many people with that name, he replies: "Probably only fifty if it's a slow day at the border." As Noriega points out: "In this scene, the *mise en scène* establishes a hierarchical conflict between mother and son that works on a number of levels: gender, generation, class, and culture of origin. But it also suggests a resolution that favors the mother's side of the equation."²⁹ Rudy questions his mother's taste and attempts to displace the picture in favour of the telephone, but she restores it to what she considers to be its proper place in the home. She also succeeds in

²⁹ Chon A. Noriega, 1995, p. 112.

getting Rudy to agree to collect Javier before she leaves with her daughter and grandchildren.

The following scene, in which Rudy encounters a French woman on his way to work at his garage has been analysed at length by Noriega:

The French woman functions as a border symbol, embodying the dual or double-edged notion of “liberty” the French acted out in the Americas in the mid-1880s. In addition to the occupation of Mexico, of course, the French also presented the Statue of Liberty to the United States as a gift of freedom to the world (dedicated in 1886). On an iconographic level, the French woman shares the “exaggerated and slightly vulgar” stride of the statue, while her position between the two flags and her red-white-and-green color scheme imply that for Chicanos and Mexicans the colonial experience still prevails over notions of universal liberty.³⁰

The action to which Noriega refers features the French woman, who is dressed provocatively and who causes chaos as she walks through the neighbourhood, against the backdrop of a mural that features the flags of Mexico and the United States. Her positioning at the centre of these flags suggests that she is a symbol of a border, and the notion that she is related to the Statue of Liberty is also appropriate, given its location on Ellis Island, the gateway to a new life for countless immigrants through the centuries.

³⁰ Chon A. Noriega, 1995, p. 114.

However, Noriega's analysis of this character neglects to situate her in light of the strong comedic thrust of the film. Her main function is not to point to France's intervention in Mexican history, a subtle point that is hinted at rather than explicitly made in the film. Instead, she acts as another indication of the negative aspects of Rudy's character. He follows her in his car, making suggestive remarks, and continues to objectify her as a purely sexual being even when he discovers that she is his customer. Rudy's exaggerated lust towards this woman directs laughter against the male voyeurism that has its roots in Marin's early films. Fregoso notes that this character also functions "as a sign of the construction of Chicano sexual desire for a white woman."³¹ The burlesque quality of Rudy's interaction with this woman both mocks the revered symbol of U.S. inclusiveness that is the Statue of Liberty and parodies filmic portrayals of Chicanos' desire for white women. This latter theme refers back to the social problem genre, which frequently centred around the questionable nature of interracial relationships, usually between Chicano men and white women.³² The combination of this scene, which suggests Rudy's desire for an exotic 'other' and the film's underscoring of his distance from his Mexican culture through his rather antagonistic conversations with his family point to his need to reassess his values and reconsider his cultural origins. It is fitting that the sequence that presents the French woman directly precedes Rudy's deportation, for his odyssey can be seen as a series of trials that ultimately lead him to prize the culture he had devalued or ignored in favour of Westernised objects of desire.

³¹ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, pp. 49-51.

Rudy's journey back to Los Angeles is presented as a trial that he must endure before he can once again inhabit the safe space represented by his home. He is treated derisively by U.S. officials throughout his journey. At the toy factory, his attempts to explain that he is a U.S. citizen are greeted by mockery. When he insists that he was born in East L.A., the following exchange takes place:

Immigration Officer: You were born in East L.A., huh? Then who is the president of the United States?

Rudy: That . . . that cowboy guy on TV. The guy that was on *Death Valley Days* . . . John Wayne!

Rudy's error here plays a crucial role in his ejection from his country, yet it is not as foolish as it seems. It refers to the absurdity of North Americans' choice of a president who not only traded on his past as an actor in Westerns but consistently exaggerated it to serve his own purposes, thus projecting the image of the kind of president he wished to be rather than concentrating on politics, as Coyne affirms:

Most remarkable was Ronald Reagan's capitalization on his mediocre claim to sagebrush stardom, based mainly on his stint as host of the television show *Death Valley Days*. Only six of his fifty-four films were Westerns, but he artfully cultivated the image, ceaselessly posing in Western garb and on horseback at his ranch and fudging in rhetoric the divide between U.S. history and the

³² John King, 1993, pp. 59-62.

nation's collective memory as filtered through Hollywood. One 1980 campaign button even featured Reagan posed before a drawing of John Wayne, with the caption "Carry on for The Duke."³³

Reagan's self-identification with John Wayne makes Rudy's conflation of the two cowboys understandable. His knowledge of Reagan's performance roots rather than his name is an ironic reflection of the power of image in politics but also suggests the limited access of Chicanos to political life. Another significant filmic reference is made by Jimmy, the North American who befriends Rudy and offers him a variety of jobs so that he can earn enough money to pay a coyote to take him home. When Rudy asks him what he is doing in Mexico, Jimmy's reply shows the same desire to live a fantasy as Reagan's cowboy posturing:

Well, you know, it's kinda like in them cowboy movies, you know, when the two guys are on horseback and they're riding across the plains and the posse is chasing them, you know, and one guy says to the other guy, if we can just make it to the Mexican border, we can make it.

Despite his poor articulation of the lure of the border, it is clear that Jimmy is caught up in the dream of reaching a mythic land, which promises escape from U.S. law and order and a new beginning. This fantasy allows him to overlook the reality of his situation as the owner of a rather sleazy bar who exploits Mexicans, Chicanos and the El Salvadorean

³³ Michael Coyne, 1998, pp. 1-2.

Dolores. Jimmy's sense of entitlement, because he provides employment and makes money, causes him to ignore the complexities of cultural difference. One of the jobs he offers to Rudy is the training of a group of Asian men who plan to go to the United States and pass as Chicanos. Rudy's classes consist of teaching these immigrants to affect the swagger of Chicanos and to recite certain colloquial phrases. The fact that they easily pass as Chicanos when they meet a Los Angeles policeman suggests that he, like Jimmy, does not look beyond the surface and sees all foreigners as alike. The inclusion of these characters, as well as that of Dolores, also points to the fact that immigration to North America is a universal phenomenon, despite the over-emphasis on the supposedly overwhelming threat posed by Mexican migration.

Born in East L.A. is most notable for its reversal of the normal attributions of good and evil based on race. Commenting on Rudy's attempt to cross the border by stowing away in a camper van driven by an elderly U.S. couple who turn out to be drug smugglers, Fregoso asserts that:

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.³⁴

The film's constant deconstruction of social codes is most evident in the figure of Rudy,

who is transformed by his experiences in Mexico. Through his contact with the Asian refugees, Dolores, a poor woman with hungry children and other characters, Rudy learns that he is part of a diverse community that is united by its otherness in the United States. His shift from the rather selfish outlook he displayed at the beginning of the film to an awareness of the problems faced by others is his greatest achievement, and soon after this he is finally released from his odyssey and allowed to return home. His encounter with the serious, hardworking Dolores also gives him a new insight into women, and they build a relationship in which she is an equal partner rather than an objectified cipher of womanhood.

At the film's conclusion, Rudy has earned enough money to pay his passage home. His transformation is seen to be complete when he makes a magnanimous gesture to a couple who are forced to separate because they cannot pay the coyote the sum he demands. Rudy steps in and gives the woman his place. This act does not mean that he is forced to return to his life in Mexico, however. In an improbable conclusion, he, Dolores, his Asian students and countless other immigrants sprint past two border guards and cross into East Los Angeles moments later, to the accompaniment of Neil Diamond's song "America." Victor Fuentes's celebratory response to this finale is typical of the reactions of Chicano critics:

³⁴ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 59.

We see Rudy . . . raising his arms in the manner of an orchestra director or of the universal author. At his signal a whole multitude is set in motion. This uncontrollable multitude goes running down the hill, flooding the dividing barrier of the border in their oceanic union, a border that for them doesn't exist in the first place.³⁵

Fuentes appears to see no contradiction between the film's structuring around the obstacles that prevent Rudy from returning home and the ease with which he and hundreds of immigrants simply run across the border. This unchallenged crossing across a border that Fuentes suggests does not exist for the immigrants makes a nonsense of the action that has preceded it. Surely if the border did not exist, neither would the issues of legality and citizenship raised by the film. Moreover, Rudy has tried unsuccessfully to cross the border several times, and the lack of adequate policing on this occasion seems curious. The conclusion is undoubtedly comic, but as West and Crowdus point out, it has little basis in reality and is "politically naïve in that it perpetuates the myth of boundless opportunities for illegal aliens in the U.S."³⁶

Despite this disappointing conclusion, the film is effective on many levels. Rudy's expulsion from his own country, despite the fact that he is a citizen, recalls the U.S. government's forced repatriations of Mexicans or Mexican-Americans throughout the 20th century. The misery of living in a place in between, a borderland populated by

³⁵ Victor Fuentes, 'Chicano Cinema: A Dialectic between Voices and Images of the Autonomous discourse Versus Those of the Dominant,' Chon A. Noriega, ed., 1992, p. 215.

³⁶ Dennis West and Gary Crowdus, 1988, p. 34.

degenerate characters, sleazy bars and desperate would-be immigrants is clearly articulated. Finally, the importance of Mexican heritage is affirmed as Rudy moves from unawareness and disinterest in his spiritual home to embracing its ethos and bringing it to Los Angeles with him, thus enriching his life.

Robert Rodriguez's 1992 feature film debut, *El Mariachi*, has received a great deal of attention for two reasons unrelated to its content. The first of these is that Rodriguez made the film at a cost of only \$7,000. The second is that to raise even that paltry sum, the director was forced to sell his body to medical science, as he recounts in his account of the making of the film, *Rebel Without a Crew*:

When it came time for me to make *El Mariachi*, I needed someplace quiet to write and earn money at the same time. Naturally, the research hospital fit the bill. I knew that if I checked in for a monthlong drug study, I could clear about \$3,000 with room and board paid for, and have plenty of time to kick back and write my script.³⁷

The film went on to achieve great international success, especially at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award prize in 1993. Unlike *El Norte* and *Born in East L.A.*, *El Mariachi* focuses on Mexico rather than the United States. Its setting, the border town of Acuña, is not recognisably Mexican, however, as it is controlled by a U.S. drug lord called Moco. The film begins when Moco's henchman Azul breaks out of

prison and hunts down his former employer, who has cheated him out of money. As this event takes place, the central character, the Mariachi, a wandering musician, nears the town. He has trouble securing work but befriends a female bar owner called Domino.

His problems begin when he is mistaken for Azul, who carries a guitar case full of guns and knives and who kills some of Moco's men. The Mariachi is hunted by Moco's men and is forced to kill a number of them in self-defence. He falls in love with Domino but eventually learns that she, like everyone else in Acuña, is beholden to Moco, who owns the bar she manages and wants her to live with him. The film's climax involves a confrontation between Azul, Domino, Moco and the Mariachi at Moco's ranch.

El Mariachi does not involve a border crossing, nor does it deal explicitly with the meaning of the border. It does, however, raise issues common to many border films: U.S. dominance and the subjugation of human relationships to money, as well as the drug trade. The opening scene, which shows Azul breaking out of prison, encapsulates the essence of life in the border town. Azul's wealth buys him a comfortable prison cell with a telephone, a fan, a remote control for the lights and several bodyguards. The easy escape from the jail by bribing the prison guards shows that even the law is for sale. The fact that the characters communicate either by telephone or through violent acts suggests the dehumanisation that the capitalist emphasis on money has brought to the town. The

³⁷ Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 11.

family theme is introduced rather obliquely, but the point is that Acuña, because of its corruption by money and power, is essentially devoid of family relationships. The main characters, Moco, Azul and Domino, seem not to have families or even friendships. They all have meaningless names and no surnames, and their dealings with each other are based on economic or physical power. The Mariachi stands as a foil to this situation. Although he too lacks a family name, his title points to a Mexican popular tradition of musicmaking and storytelling that is an integral part of his identity. He is the only character who mentions his family. Moreover, he is unique in his desire to honour and perpetuate his cultural legacy, as his opening comment underlines: “Desde que era pequeño siempre quise ser un mariachi, como mi padre, mi abuelo y mi bisabuelo . . . Mi idea era seguir sus pasos hasta el final y morir con mi guitarra en la mano.” The Mariachi’s reverence for the past and frequent comments on the contrast between the past and the present elevate him to the status of social commentator in the film. His realisation that there is more to life than money and his resistance to violence as far as possible set him apart and may even be the keys to his survival.

The film’s most obvious connection to the border film genre is made through its presentation of conflict between U.S. culture, as embodied by Moco, and Mexican culture, which is represented by the Mariachi. Moco is an archetypal villain, who controls everyone around him and seems barely human in his appetite for violence and the humiliation of others. Intentionally or not, since he like the others in the film is not a

professional actor, he plays his part as if he were the villain in a silent movie, with his exaggerated facial gestures and manic laughter at the suffering of others. The division between him and even Azul, who also exerts his power through violence, becomes apparent after Moco kills Domino. Azul condemns this act, saying that he only wanted his share of the loot that Moco had stolen from him but that Moco must kill everyone. He is proved correct moments later, when Moco shoots him. The Mariachi, who stands at the opposite end of the moral scale, is presented not only as representative of Mexican culture but also as a highly individual character who eschews the machismo so often associated with Mexican men. Ironically, his appearance strongly resembles the stereotype of the macho described by Harold Rosenberg: “la masculinidad es problema de ciertos detalles del vestuario tradicional: el sombrero, los pantalones de vaquero y la guitarra,”³⁸ but his behaviour marks him as different.

The Mariachi’s first attempt to find work sets the pattern for what will follow. The bartender mocks him and shows him that instead of paying a Mariachi, he has a whole band. At this, a sombrero-clad man plays an electric keyboard programmed to make cacophonous vocal and pseudo-musical sounds. As the Mariachi leaves in disgust, the bartender shouts: “Si quieres ganar una vida real, consíguete un instrumento que valga la pena, cabrón.” Ironically, moments later Azul enters the bar, also carrying a guitar case. The barman’s mockery of him ceases when he asks for a beer and then kills four of

³⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, *Escenas de pudor y liviandad*, (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1981), p. 109.

Moco's men, who are drinking in the bar. Azul's choice of the instrument that the barman suggests will make him a real living actually brings death.

This encounter, as well as the confusion between the Mariachi and Azul, who carries an arsenal of weapons in his guitar case, suggest that the Mariachi is an anachronism in a society obsessed with technology and money. In her analysis of the film, Cynthia Rose goes further, suggesting that the entire structure of *El Mariachi* replicates the situations that arise so often in *corridos*, the types of songs that the Mariachi sings and that played a key role in the evolution of Mexican-American culture and identity.³⁹ Américo Paredes' seminal text, *With a Pistol in his Hand*, is dedicated to the ballad tradition of the border region. Paredes notes that ballads were part of everyday life and a true expression of the identity of the inhabitants of border towns such as Nuevo Santander:

The Nuevo Santander people also sang ballads. Some were songs remembered from their Spanish origins, and perhaps an occasional ballad came to them from the older frontier colony of Nuevo Mexico. But chiefly they made their own. They committed their daily affairs and their history to the ballad form: the fights against the Indians, the horse races, and the domestic triumphs and tragedies — and later the border conflicts and the civil wars. The ballads, and the tradition of ballad-making as well, were handed down from father to son, and thus the people of the Lower Rio Grande developed a true native balladry.⁴⁰

³⁹ Cynthia Rose, 'El Mariachi,' *Sight & Sound*, (September 1993), p. 182.

The principal ballad examined in this text is *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, which expresses the animosity of Mexican residents of the borderlands towards the U.S. representatives of authority in the region, the Texas Rangers. The fact that the dubious right of North Americans to lands annexed after 1848 was upheld by the rangers exacerbated the cultural conflict in the area. Mexicans who opposed their authority, like Gregorio Cortez, became heroes celebrated in *corridos*, as Paredes writes.⁴¹ The place of the corrido in *El Mariachi* suggests its key significance to Mexican culture. When the Mariachi is threatened by Domino and forced to prove that he is a musician rather than an assassin, as she suspects, he invents a *corrido* that relates his experiences in Acuña in the typical border ballad style described by Paredes:

The Border *corrido* is not given to detailed description or to a great deal of embroidery in language. Its main object is narrative, and it keeps adjectives and figures of speech to a bare minimum, being in this respect very much like its parent, the *romance*.⁴²

The Mariachi's quick-witted adaptation of his experiences in Acuña into a polished corrido suggests that his heritage will help him outwit the U.S.-influenced gangsters in the town. His ability to craft a song in a matter of seconds bears testament to the generations of skilled musicianship that he carries within him, furthermore.

⁴⁰ Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 15.

⁴¹ Américo Paredes, 1998, p. 32.

As well as commenting on cross-cultural clashes and on the demise of Mexican heritage, *El Mariachi* revives the Western genre and adapts it to a more contemporary period. Rodriguez makes use of the staple Western storyline featuring a lone hero in a corrupt town whose only attraction lies in the female company at the saloon. This plot echoes that of many Westerns, including *Destry Rides Again* (1939), which Rodriguez may well have taken as a template to work with, for the mockery Destry suffers because of his distaste for guns is replicated in the taunting the Mariachi receives when he asks for a soft drink in a hard-drinking town. Rose sees Rodriguez's appropriation of cinematic standards as knowing and ironic:

Rodriguez uses the clichés to make an interesting point: his hero's *mejicano* dream—his familial destiny of carrying on as a mariachi – has lingered past its expiry date (this subtext becomes clear from the moment he enters town, when he passes a dusty bust of the one-time revolutionary President, Francisco I Madero).⁴³

Ultimately, the Mariachi is unable to resist the corruption he is surrounded by. His battle with Moco culminates in a shootout at Moco's ranch. Realising that Domino, the saloon owner whom Moco loves, is in love with his rival, Moco shoots him in the hand. This act provokes the Mariachi to kill intentionally for the first time. As one would expect, Moco's men simply leave his body on the ground where he fell, as he is of no use to them

⁴² Américo Paredes, 1998, p. 216.

⁴³ Cynthia Rose, *Sight & Sound*, (September 1993), p. 182.

dead. The Mariachi takes his leave on Domino's motorbike, carrying her dog and the case full of weapons with him and saying:

Lo que quería era solamente ser un mariachi como mis antepasados, pero la ciudad que pensé que me traía suerte trajo maldición. Perdí mi guitarra, mi mano y a ella. Con esta herida no sé si podré volver a tocar la guitarra, y sin ella no tengo amor. Pero con este perro y las armas estoy preparado para el futuro.

This conclusion is ominous to say the least. The Mariachi's survival can be seen as some kind of defeat of the North American's power, although it is doubtful that anything will change in the town, as he is likely to be replaced by one of his men. The Mariachi, meanwhile, has proved unable to resist the corruption brought by U.S. capitalism and technology. In contrast to his arrival on foot to the town carrying his guitar, he leaves on a motorcycle with a case full of weapons and a strong possibility that he has lost his ability to play, and therefore a great part of his identity and heritage. Moreover, his replacement of his guitar with a case full of weapons implies that he is no longer a foil for Azul, for whom he has been mistaken throughout the film, but has become him. The film's trajectory shows that the meeting of different cultures in an environment with no family relations as a mitigating influence and a complete lack of reflection on identity will end in disaster. Throughout the film, the contrast between the evil Moco and the good Mariachi has been absolute; this level of differentiation allows for no development

or compromise. In the end, there are no winners in this film, and the Mariachi's survival has been bought at the terrible price of a loss of identity and the death of his cultural legacy. In terms of the cinematic traditions that Rodriguez has incorporated into *El Mariachi*, the ending marks a movement from a gentle, postmodern Western with a nonviolent protagonist who defends tradition to a violent film whose central character is an action hero who has survived because of his skill with arms and his acceptance of technology. Hollywood violence seems to have engulfed the originally charming film hero.

The three films present diverse scenarios structured around the physical and symbolic presence of the border. *El Norte* is perhaps the most traditional in its approach, in that the border is presented as a physical barrier that immigrants must overcome in their search for a new life. *Born in East L.A.* is more innovative in its use of the border motif to highlight the fragility of Chicano citizenship. Both of these films, which were made in the 1980s, reflect the antipathy of North Americans towards Mexican immigrants at the time but also display some optimism in their depictions of the transformations that result from border crossings, which are not inherently negative. *El Mariachi* is the darkest film of the three. It is the only film to suggest a decisive solution to cross-cultural conflicts, although its bloody conclusion, which features the death of traditional culture through the corruption of the protagonist by U.S. dominance, is hardly proposed as a model to emulate. To return to the distinction between the frontier and the border, both *El Norte*

and *Born in East L.A.* intimate that immigrants can advance, if only on a superficial level, through the material opportunities offered by North America. *El Mariachi's* profound pessimism with regard to cultural difference, on the other hand, reflects a quintessential view of the border as an unassailable barrier. The other films are more satisfying in their portrayal of a great deal of hope in their presentations of cultural difference, although they lack decisive conclusions to the problems arising from intercultural differences.

Family Matters: From the Barrio to the Gang

In his short story "Sánchez," Richard Dokey examines the hopes and frustrations experienced by a Mexican man who goes to live with his wife, La Belleza, in the Sierra Nevada. Even though La Belleza is advised not to have children because of previous pregnancies that ended in disaster and almost killed her, her husband Juan Sánchez is optimistic about the possibilities their adopted land offers. They buy and renovate a shack in a beautiful part of the mountains and learn to live in peace, despite the racism they initially endure. Their happiness is shattered when La Belleza accidentally becomes pregnant again and dies after having a son, Jesús. Although Juan remains in the United States for the sake of his son and attempts to filter his hopes for the future through him, he becomes increasingly embittered by the loss of his wife and his disappointment in what he sees as his son's North American greed and brutishness. His disillusionment with his son reaches a climax as Jesús attempts to impress him by telling him of the money he makes in a machine-filled factory and of the buildings that are being torn down in his town to build new ones, unaware that his father despises such materialism and superficial progress:

He had stayed after La Belleza's death for the boy, to be with him until manhood, to show him the loveliness of the Sierra Nevada, to instruct him toward true manhood. But Jesús. Ah, Jesús.

Jesús the American . . . Jesús understood nothing. Jesús, he believed, was forever lost to knowledge.¹

Dokey's narrative eloquently conveys the pressures faced by Mexican immigrants and the hopes they invest in their children. Having overcome racism and the disappointment of not being able to have a family, Sánchez is dealt a further blow when his beloved wife dies. His grief is compounded by the gap between him and his son and his subsequent feeling of frustration at how the boy has moved away from his Mexican heritage and become a North American in his outlook to life. On a metaphorical level, the death of La Belleza because of Jesús's birth points to the annihilation of Mexican culture, which is replaced by materialism and crudeness.

This particular case is reflective of the experiences of many Mexican emigrants to the United States, who face enormous pressures in adapting to a new land and expect a great deal of their children. The first generations of immigrants encountered many challenges in integrating to U.S. society because of their very different values. Prior to 1930, for instance, education was the preserve of the upper classes in Mexico, with the result that the immigrants who travelled did not value education. They established communities that were more Mexican than North American in character, to the bafflement of North Americans:

¹ Richard Dokey, *The Chicanos: Mexican American Voices*, Edward Ludwig, ed., 1971, p. 78-79.

Another problem that Mexicans as well as other minorities have had in the United States is that Americans could not or would not understand why any group was reluctant to part with its own heritage and to embrace the values of the dominant society. But the fact was that Mexican peons struggled from day to day merely to provide the essentials of life for their families. They often did not see the long-range benefits that might accrue to their children from a good education. Even when they did, they may have been shrewd enough to recognize that American education would undermine traditional values and lead their children away from the family and its culture and into the outstretched arms of the dominant culture.²

The dominance of the Mexican family model persisted for many years to come. Many immigrants during the early decades of the 20th century outwardly conformed to U.S. standards — by speaking English, observing local customs and changing their way of dress — but replicated Mexican family structures at home.

The extremely rigid model of the traditional Mexican family allowed for little compromise, so that by the 1960s, when it began to seem increasingly out of step with the changes in U.S. society, the family became a contentious issue. As women sought more autonomy, they rejected their traditional roles, while young people increasingly questioned the authority of their parents or older family members. Several studies suggest that the family continues to play a key role in the formation of a positive sense of identity among the children of immigrants. Conversely, the very importance of the family means

² Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 117.

that the children of immigrants face unique family pressures that can lead to distance between the different generations, as Suárez-Orozco writes:

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 overrestrict the activities of the children and attempt to minimize the host country's influence.³

Caught between their parents' desire to safeguard their heritage and their own need to assimilate into U.S. culture, second-generation Mexican-Americans often rebel against the family. Ironically, this rebellion can take extremely different forms. Ambitious Mexican-Americans may attempt to resolve identity conflicts by embracing complete assimilation and U.S. values. Although such a resolution may distance the individual from the family, it can lead to greater success in North American terms, as the Chicano suppresses his otherness and therefore becomes more acceptable to the North American mainstream. The other form of family rejection is usually associated with youths who receive the least parental and familial attention, as a study of gangs by James D. Vigil has found:

³ Carola and Marcela Suárez Orozco, 'Migration: Generational Discontinuities and the Making of Latino Identities,' George A. de Vos, ed., 1995, p. 333.

...the individuals who are most heavily involved in gangs come from the most troubled families . . . in the absence of role models to identify with, gang membership becomes incorporated into their sense of identity. Gangs offer their members a sense of belonging, solidarity, support, discipline, and warmth. Gangs also structure the rage *cholos* feel toward the society that violently rejected their parents and themselves.⁴

Despite the radical changes in society from the 1960s to the present, on one hand the family continues to have a defining role in the formation of Chicano identity. On the other, whether because of a desire to fit in with U.S. norms or a feeling of rejection from the family itself, members of the younger generation have found it necessary to forge identities unrelated to those of their families. Even those who do not make a complete break with the family unit take issue with what they see as its overly traditional definition of gender roles and their parents' acceptance of a subaltern position in U.S. society. These tensions have led to the creation of nontraditional family models, particularly the gang.

The theme of the family plays a persistently central role in Chicano film. From Luis Valdez's 1987 *La Bamba* to Edward James Olmos's 1992 *American Me*, the family has functioned as a key motif that suggests the extent to which the formation of identity on a personal level can aid or hinder the Chicano's efforts to resolve his conflicts as a

⁴ James D. Vigil, *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*, in George A. de Vos, ed., 1995, p. 336.

marginalised member of North American society. *La Bamba*'s drama springs from the tension between Ritchie, who identifies more strongly with U.S. culture than with his Mexican heritage, and his half-brother Bob, an archetypal rebellious greaser. Meanwhile, Santana, the protagonist of *American Me*, is forced to create an alternative family through his gang when his own family proves unable to grant him a secure sense of identity. Jesús Treviño, the director of *Raíces de sangre*, makes a direct link between the process of representing Chicano identity on screen and the Chicano family. As Chon A. Noriega observes, Treviño has directly stated that the role of Chicano filmmakers is a didactic one centred on the family:

“When you talk about independence, about standing up for justice, you’re talking about your mother, your sisters and brothers, your family, your people. It’s not something you mess with, it’s something you respect as you would yourself.” The father is placed outside Treviño’s description of the family, as is the “you” associated with the filmmakers, suggesting an equivalence between the two as they “stand up” for the Chicano family *cum* community.⁵

La Bamba, made in 1987, was directed by Luis Valdez, the former director of El Teatro Campesino and a key figure in the Chicano Movement as the organiser of the United Farm Workers. Valdez had already produced a visual adaptation of the epic poem *I Am Joaquín* (1969) and *Zoot Suit* (1981), an exploration of cultural identity based on the

⁵ Chon A. Noriega, 2000, p. 137.

Sleepy Lagoon trial of 1942. The latter work was a critical but not a commercial success.

As Fregoso comments, *La Bamba* was “a radical departure from his earlier concerns with hard-hitting political and social issues,”⁶ a fact that has led to strident criticism of the film from a number of Chicano writers. Clearly, Valdez was aware of this shift, however, and sought to create a successful crossover drama in *La Bamba* that would resonate with mainstream U.S. audiences and teach them something of the difficulties faced by Chicanos in their society.

In order to appeal to U.S. viewers, Valdez appropriates and conflates two conventional Hollywood genres, the biopic and the American Dream narrative. He also appeals to cultural nostalgia through the 1950s soundtrack of the film. *La Bamba* concentrates on the life of Ritchie Valens, a gifted 17-year-old who enjoyed only three hits before he died in the same plane crash as Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper.⁷ Despite his enduring popularity, especially among the Chicano community, Valens’s story is not in itself sufficiently compelling to explain the remarkable impact and commercial success of the film. His life was too short and his fame too quickly achieved to provide sufficient drama for a screenplay. Valdez realised this and explored a different, little-known aspect of his life instead, his troubled relationship with his half-brother, Bob, as he explains:

⁶ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 39.

⁷ Simon Garfield, ‘The Resurrection Shuffle,’ *Time Out*, (No.890, Vol.9, September 1987), p. 19.

The problem was that Ritchie had been dead for thirty years, and he was a cherished memory. Nobody wanted to say anything bad about him . . . I was getting nowhere . . . until I talked to his half-brother, Bob. He was reluctant, but he did tell me they'd fought, and that it was Bob's fault. So I thought, well at least there's a foundation, then, a relationship between brothers. And the real-life conflict between them, and Bob's conflict with realizing that the man who raised him and Ritchie was not Bob's biological father.⁸

Valdez's structuring of the film around family conflict means that Bob is the agent of much of the drama in the film. In the opening scene, as Ritchie and his mother, Connie, work in a fruit-picking labour camp, Bob suddenly appears, having been released from prison. He immediately disrupts the family's routine by giving Connie money to move them from the camp and courting Rosita, a neighbour whom Ritchie had admired from afar. The flamboyant Bob is evidently a foil to the measured, more conservative Ritchie even at this early stage of the film. Bob drives a powerful motorbike decorated with the head of an Aztec warrior and a feathered Indian, motifs that associate him with both cultural authenticity and warrior-like masculinity. His tattoo of a cross symbolises Catholicism, although the juxtaposition of the Aztec and the Catholic emblems suggests a blend of the pagan and the Catholic and a resistance to the acceptance of one all-embracing philosophy. This combination of Western and pre-Columbian motifs also points to Bob's Chicano identity, which is based on a similar blending of cultural motifs.

⁸ Mario Barrera, 'What Gets Left Out of Latino Film Analysis,' *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, (Vol. 6, 1997), p. 178.

Bob's identification with his Mexican heritage is further underlined when he takes Ritchie to Tijuana after Ritchie has broken up with his North American girlfriend, Donna. The contrast between the brothers is even more pronounced in this sequence. Bob indulges in drinking and the company of prostitutes, while Ritchie emerges even from this sordid milieu pure and industrious, having heard the song that will be his greatest hit and enduring legacy, "La Bamba," played at a brothel. Ritchie has consistently denied his Mexican heritage up to this point. His aspirations are solidly North American and middle-class. He aims to be a rock and roll star and to build a relationship with the chaste, blonde Donna. When Ritchie records a song under the guidance of Bob King, the president of Delphi Records, King frequently interrupts his singing, telling him that each take must be identical, unlike the Mexican tradition whereby the singers constantly change the lyrics of the songs they sing. Ritchie responds indignantly: "Look man, I've never even been to Mexico. My music is my music." Ritchie is persuaded to change his name, dropping Valenzuela, his father's name, in a bid for a more commercial image, much to the disgust of Bob, who sees this act as a betrayal of Ritchie's father, Steve.

When Bob takes Ritchie to see a *curandero* after their night in Tijuana, Ritchie is at first skeptical, saying: "Yo no speako español." Bob persists, however, translating for Ritchie and acting as a bridge between the Americanised Ritchie and the Mexican shaman. This is the only scene in which Ritchie appears inferior to Bob, as Fregoso notes: "As the agent of cultural transmission, Bob is enveloped in notions of authenticity as much as he

is by pathology.”⁹ As well as establishing Bob’s pride in his roots, this exchange serves to heighten the desire for a father figure that underpins Bob’s lack of stability. Bob explains to Ritchie: “He’s a *curandero*, a healer and a wise man. He’s sort of my spiritual father. I’ve been coming here for years.” Bob is shown to seek the answers to his societal and familial conflicts through his identification with Mexican culture and his quest for a father figure. Repeatedly throughout the narrative, Bob laments his loss of a father and the fact that Steve, whom he idolised, was not his real father. When he first appears, he tells Ritchie that he has not had a real home since Steve died. As Ritchie enjoys increasing acclaim before his death, Bob sinks deeper into domestic chaos, as Rosita bears him a child and he drinks heavily. When Ritchie confronts him after a Christmas party that Bob leaves, Bob explains his emotional turmoil as a reaction to his perceived rejection by Steve because he was not his real son:

That’s when I knew the full score, I understood, see? I realised why he always treated you just a little bit better than me. Okay, that’s it, you know? I’d just hang around and take the leftovers, like a dog. That’s how much I loved him. Like a goddam dog.

After this outburst, the brothers have their most serious fight, which degenerates into physical violence. It ends when the talisman that the *curandero* had given Ritchie, the only symbol of closeness between the brothers, breaks. Although Ritchie later telephones

⁹ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 45.

Bob and they make up, their relationship is never really resolved, because Ritchie dies soon afterwards. Ironically, after Ritchie's death Bob's conflicts appear to lessen somewhat — he gives up drinking, adapts to family life and seems to reconcile with his mother as they find comfort in each other. Valdez's differentiation between the brothers sends mixed messages throughout the film. Ritchie, the conformist, Americanised brother achieves outstanding success, despite his lack of a real connection with his heritage. Much has been made of Ritchie's transformation after his journey to Mexico and encounter with the shaman, but the only lasting trace of his new appreciation of his heritage is his hit song. The fact that he translates an experience that ought to be spiritual into a product that brings him acclaim and financial reward is an indication that he still prizes commercial gain more than his Mexican culture.

Bob is the representative of the "authentic" Chicano in the film, but he is hardly a sympathetic character. He not only drinks and takes drugs but treats both Rosita and his mother abusively and engages in self-pitying, maudlin behaviour with regard to his loss of a father figure. His combination of violent rebellion and sentimental mourning prevents him from leading a productive life or becoming a good father himself. Charles Ramírez Berg argues that the theme of the absent father, a standard in the Hollywood social problem film, provides a means of explaining the marginalisation of the Chicano in North American thought:

Anglo families are complete and ideal, ethnic families fragmented and dysfunctional. The father's absence, from *Bordertown* to *La Bamba* (1987) is seldom explained. Once again, from the male-dominant point of view, the lack of an organizing paternal sensibility makes for an abnormal, structurally unstable family unit, subtly establishing the psycho-social reason why ethnics are different from — and inferior to — the mainstream.¹⁰

As the above analysis suggests, the Chicano families in *La Bamba* are unconventional and chaotic. Connie has had at least two partners, Bob's absent father and Steve, and possibly a third, as she also has a young daughter. Perhaps the most ironic episode in the film occurs in the opening sequence set in the fruit picking camp, when Connie chats to the other women and says that she was forced to dissuade Steve from hitting her, as she had put up with too much of that kind of abuse already. This revelation makes Bob's adoration of Steve seem completely misplaced. The image of the World War II veteran venerated by Bob proves to be at odds with the reality of his mother's domestic problems. Bob's relationship with Connie is thus marred not only by his excesses and violence but by the shadow of a dead man whose image has become an ideal for Bob rather than a representation of reality.

The female characters in the film, Connie and Rosita, both fare badly at the hands of men. Unlike Ritchie, both Steve and especially Bob, are violent towards women. Connie and Rosita do not passively accept this behaviour, however. Connie's mention of Steve's

¹⁰ Charles Ramírez Berg, in Chon A. Noriega, ed., 1992, p. 38.

attempt to hit her shows that she stood up to him and forced him to realize that she would not accept such treatment. She also had the strength to sanction Bob's criminal tendencies by sending him to prison, despite the conflict that this created. Rosita, in turn, constantly rejects Bob's efforts to dominate her, supported by Connie. As well as demonstrating solidarity for each other in their behaviour towards Bob, the women are strong characters in their own right, who deal with poverty and the hardships of family life with dignity. Despite their physical beauty, moreover, the emphasis is on their character rather than their sexuality, and they stand as a welcome contrast to Hollywood images of sensual Latina sirens.

The only Chicano in the film to come close to having a stable family unit is Ritchie. His girlfriend, Donna, is a pure, conservative girl who values her father's approval more than Ritchie's love and breaks off their relationship because her father is a racist. This impediment disappears when Ritchie achieves success, however, and the couple discuss marriage before Ritchie is killed. The difficulties Bob faces in his attempts to create a family are captured with sensitivity. As a member of a marginalised group who refuses to discard his identity to fit in, Bob can only find work as a garbage collector. He is unable to develop his artistic talent because of his poverty and responsibilities to Rosita and their child. Even his violence and substance abuse can be explained to some extent as a response to his feeling of rejection and lack of belonging to a family that centres around the successful Ritchie. Fregoso acknowledges the chasm between the culturally

authentic Bob's delinquency and Ritchie's wholesome image, but she suggests that the latter's assimilationist tendencies lead to a positive blending of cultures:

Cultural vitality and retention are linked to social deviance, whereas socially mobile Chicanos like Ritchie seem to guarantee the circulation of Chicano culture on a broader scale, as the example of the recording of a popular song like "La Bamba" for mass consumption indicates.¹¹

This assertion is questionable, for triumph of the song is a reflection of both the successes and shortcomings of Valdez's film. Like the song, the film draws attention to and celebrates Chicano culture through a form of artistic expression. While the song is certainly an important marker of Chicano talent and innovation, it is not clear that it leads to a greater appreciation of Chicano culture in U.S. society. It would appear that Donna's parents, for instance, are more impressed by the financial rewards and status that result from Ritchie's success with the song than by its links to a Chicano culture that is only acceptable to them in the modified form represented by the assimilated Ritchie.

Likewise, the film *La Bamba* celebrates a meeting of cultures that is possible only for Americanised characters like Ritchie. At the film's conclusion, Bob remains much as he has been from the outset, a disturbed character whose longing for an elusive father figure is replaced by his mourning of his dead brother.

¹¹ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 45.

Overall, *La Bamba* remains a significant work that reveals the difficulties faced by Chicanos in U.S. society and the family difficulties intertwined with external pressures. These issues are presented in an unflinching, convincing manner, as Victor Fuentes notes: “. . . in *La Bamba* the representation of the life of a farmworker family, now moved to an urban setting, is accurately represented, as far as customs, gestures, feelings and language.”¹² The real paradox at the heart of *La Bamba* may be the difficulty of incorporating complex sociopolitical issues into a mainstream film aimed at a teenage audience. A more profound reflection on the ambiguities of cultural assimilation would not only make the film too overtly ideological but would presumably doom its box-office performance. Despite its flaws, *La Bamba* represents an important commercial triumph for Chicano features. Although it was made on a budget of only \$7 million, it grossed over \$60 million in the United States alone and had a record 77 Spanish-language prints.¹³ Its rather confused articulation of Chicano identity notwithstanding, the film is notable for its successful recasting of Hollywood formulas to create an entertaining and informative mainstream film that appealed to North American and Chicano audiences alike.

Like *La Bamba*, Gregory Nava's 1995 follow-up to *El Norte*, *My Family*, is a reflection on Chicano identity that focuses on the family. This multigenerational drama spans the period from the late 1920s, when the family patriarch travels to the United States to find

¹² Victor Fuentes, in Chon A. Noriega, ed., 1992, p. 212.

his last living relative, an old man called El Californio who lives in Los Angeles, to the 1980s. The film incorporates a plethora of events that have been integral to the shaping of a distinctive Chicano identity, such as the forced repatriation of Mexicans during the Great Depression and gang activity in the 1950s. History is portrayed as cyclical, as events foreshadow or repeat other occurrences in the family's story. The culture clash between the Mexican-Americans and the dominant culture is also mirrored in the gap between successive generations of the family.

Nava achieves a more even balance between entertainment and instruction in his film than Valdez, in part because he has far more characters at his disposal, with the result that the problems endured by one protagonist can be offset by the comic antics of others. The patriarch, José Sánchez, is a sympathetic but largely comic creation, who remains as passive and naïve at the film's conclusion as he was at its beginning. María, the woman who will become his wife, shows more resolve, although she remains a caricature of maternal fortitude whose virtue and patience seem inexhaustible. Their oldest son, Paco, the narrator of the family saga, is a marginal figure who serves mainly to give shape to the sprawling narrative. His sisters, Irene and Toni, are very different. Irene is the most stock character of the film and could have been taken directly from a Mexican comedy. She is associated with food from her first appearance in the film, and her ballooning figure and over made-up face provide light relief throughout. Toni, in contrast, breaks

¹³ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, p. 39.

Despite Nava's stated intention, however, the film's most dramatic scenes are frequently structured around historical events and his disavowal that there is an intentional connection between the private life of the family and the public sphere seems rather disingenuous. Perhaps because of its overambitious range of subject matter and characters, the film has not always been well-received. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Lucy O'Brien dismisses it as sentimental and lacking in complexity:

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.¹⁵

To dismiss the film in this manner ignores its real subject, however, which is not immigration *per se* but the evolution of the identity of Chicanos in relation to their families. The principal family unit presented here is radically different from the unstable, informal Chicano families of *La Bamba*. Through many changes and trials the family endures, and the parents remain a solid unit whose traditional values, such as religious belief and the consequent acceptance of the hardships of life, remain intact. Despite this example, none of their children accept the status quo that their parents represent, however. In this sense, the film mirrors the identification patterns established in *La*

¹⁵ Lucy O'Brien, 'My Family,' *Sight and Sound*, (Vol.5, No.10, October 1995), p. 54.

Bamba, and the most effective scenes in *My Family* feature a crisis of identification parallel to that explored in Valdez's film. The characters of Chucho and Jimmy are reminiscent of Bob in their rebellion, and their rejection of family standards as well as their criminal behaviour. Guillermo, like the ambitious Ritchie, identifies with U.S. culture and longs to be accepted by the mainstream, although unlike Ritchie, he denies his Mexican heritage completely.

Nava goes to great lengths to present the family as a positive force throughout the narrative. Although Toni, the younger daughter, rebels in her own way, her family accept her decision to leave the convent and marry, as they also welcome her North American husband into the fold. Toni would appear to have moved away from her culture by marrying a North American, but he is clearly as committed to their community work as she is, and even her dress, which favours ethnic-style garments, strongly identifies her as a Mexican-American, despite her nonconformist attitudes. Irene is the archetypal Mexican mama, who is seldom seen outside the kitchen and whose wedding is a key event in the celebration of the family promoted by Nava, although even here, Chucho rejects Mexican culture, motioning to the band and saying "I hate this mariachi shit." Despite his insistence on the centrality of the family to Mexican-American society, Nava does not avoid the presentation of family conflicts, chiefly through the figures of Chucho and Jimmy. It is Chucho who most bluntly rejects his family's moral code and who articulates the generation gap between the more rebellious children and their placid

parents, who accept their humble position in society and take pride in their work and their home. Chucho rejects their work ethic, becoming a drunken drug dealer and joining a criminal gang, much to his father's dismay:

José: I didn't raise my children to be sinvergüenzas, delinquentes . . . Don't you have any pride?
¿No tienes dignidad?

Chucho: Fuck la dignidad . . . I don't want to be like no Mexican. You think for one minute I want to spend all fucking day pulling up weeds and mowing lawns? You got another think coming. La chingada con eso.

Following a knife fight in a club frequented by gangs that recall the characters in *West Side Story*, Chucho is forced to flee, having accidentally killed his adversary. Jimmy, Chucho's youngest brother, brings him provisions and soon after witnesses his death at the hands of the police, who are portrayed unequivocally as racists. Even the timid José does not escape their brutality. As he attempts to see his son's body, he is savagely beaten by a police officer. The cyclical nature of the story is underlined in Chucho's death, which is not linked to his criminal activities but to destiny. Chucho returned with his mother to North America after she was deported and almost died while they crossed a river. His death is thus interpreted, rather unconvincingly, as the result of the river spirit's desire to possess him. A further element of the film's circular vision of history is the seeming inevitability of Jimmy's delinquency, which appears to have infected him from the moment he witnessed his brother's killing. Jimmy, unlike Chucho, is redeemed,

however, essentially through his marriage to an El Salvadorean immigrant and his reunion with his son after a prison term. Significantly, this reunion takes place in the corn field around the family home, which functions repeatedly as a motif representing not only the rural idyll of Mexico but growth and renewal.

If Chucho's delinquent behaviour can be read in the light of his debt to the river spirit and Jimmy's in terms of Chucho's influence, then Guillermo's rejection of his family is the most jarring in the film. Although he plays a relatively minor role in the film, he is important in demonstrating the different identifications within the family. He personifies everything that is problematic about assimilation by attempting to deny his heritage. A successful lawyer who is the pride of his parents, he constantly strives to distance himself from them. The name plate on his office door identifies him as "William," and when he visits his parents' home with his blonde, North American girlfriend and her middle-class parents, he seems as uncomfortable as they are. He also goes to great lengths to associate himself with U.S. culture rather than that of his own family. He dismisses his father's story that El Californio is buried in the back garden as legend, although it is in fact true, and silences his father. Clearly embarrassed to be considered part of Mexican culture, Guillermo assures his guests: "Actually, I've never been to Mexico. I've always lived here in Los Angeles just like yourselves." The appearance of Jimmy's son, Carlito, who is dressed in an Indian costume and exposes himself to the visitors, finally shatters Guillermo's patience. After his guests leave, he attacks Jimmy for allowing the boy to

disgrace him, eliciting a bitter response: “You cabrón, you think you’re better than everyone else,” a statement that Guillermo’s actions seem to confirm.

At the film’s conclusion, José comments to his wife that they have had a good life. Given the amount of intergenerational turmoil they have faced, this statement seems rather baffling. Nava’s film is resoundingly upbeat despite the conflicts he portrays, however, and his effort to reaffirm the status of the family as the fundamental basis of Chicano society is evident in this conclusion. Ultimately, his vision of family life is extremely conservative. The only truly rebellious character, Chucho, dies, while even Toni’s desertion of the convent after falling in love with an ex-priest is modified by their subsequent marriage and dedication to social work. Jimmy is redeemed through marriage and becomes a hard-working labourer who supports his son. Guillermo is clearly ashamed of his family and his Mexican heritage, but the fact that he even brings his girlfriend and her parents to visit suggests that he has not severed all ties with his family. Regardless of his recognition of the identification of the characters with either pathological alternative gang families or the more innocuous identification of the ambitious Chicano with U.S. culture, Nava reestablishes the family as the locus of Chicano identity at his film’s conclusion and refuses to consider a less traditional model as a viable alternative.

The films that conclude this analysis, Ramón Menéndez's *Stand and Deliver* (1987) and Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992) differ from *La Bamba* and *My Family* in that their protagonists do not centre their identities around the family and are thus forced to create alternative families outside the home. In the case of *Stand and Deliver*, the alternative family is composed of high school students led and nurtured by their teacher, Jaime Escalante, who cares more about their welfare than their own families do and who is an inspirational role model for the male and female students alike. The scenario in *American Me* could not be more different. This graphic, violent film exposes the pathology of gang life through its protagonist, Santana. Santana is driven to create a family by means of his gang because his father rejects him. Although initially the gang seems to offer some solidarity and security, its increasingly criminal nature leads inevitably to sterility and death.

Following the model established by *La Bamba*, *Stand and Deliver* is based on a true story and on the Hollywood genre of the inexperienced teacher who inspires his marginalised students to achieve great success. As Ilene S. Goldman points out, this genre has been reworked several times in Hollywood, from Richard Brooks's 1955 *Blackboard Jungle* to Penny Marshall's *Renaissance Man* (1994.) The film's closest parallel, according to Goldman, is with James Clavell's *To Sir, With Love* (1966), starring Sidney Poitier as Mr Thackery, because the main obstacle faced by both the inspirational teacher and his students is racism:

Thackery and Escalante stand apart from their colleagues because of racial and ethnic difference. Both challenge their colleagues' resigned approach to students disadvantaged by socioeconomics and ethnicity. *Stand and Deliver* emphasizes the students' and their teacher's Latino heritage . . . For Escalante, ethnicity provides an entrée into the students' minds. By the end of the film, the students find strength in their Chicano identity and fight a system that would limit their opportunities because of that identity.¹⁶

At the outset of the film, it seems unlikely that Escalante will succeed in appealing to his students through their shared ethnicity, as he is seen to inhabit a very different world to theirs. The opening shot features a close-up of a river. As the camera pulls back and this scene dissolves, the river is revealed to be a barrier between West and East Los Angeles. On his first day as a teacher, Escalante crosses from a pleasant, tree-lined neighbourhood in West Los Angeles into a bustling, rather threatening East Los Angeles barrio. The motif of the flowing river, echoed in Escalante's crossing, points to his ability to move easily between two cultures. The *mise en scène* captures both the poverty and the ethnicity of the East Los Angeles location through images of vendors offering fruit to passing cars, labourers riding in the back of a pickup truck, a shop front adorned with *piñatas*, and a group of Mariachi musicians waiting at a pedestrian crossing. Buildings

¹⁶ Ilene S. Goldman, 'Crossing Invisible Borders,' Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 82.

are decorated with colourful murals, one of which anticipates the film's overturning of negative stereotypes of Mexican-Americans — it depicts Che Guevara standing in front of the slogan "Not a Minority."

The rather grim picture of East Los Angeles society conveyed in the opening sequence is reinforced as Escalante enters Garfield High School and discovers that it has been vandalised the previous night. His dislocation is underlined when he learns that the school has no computers, although he understood that he was to teach computer science. He is reassigned to teach mathematics instead. His classroom reflects the chaos outside the school. Students chat noisily and ignore him, some of them do not respond to his instructions because they cannot speak English, there are not enough chairs to accommodate everyone, and the class breaks up early because the students have rigged the bell to sound prematurely.

Escalante returns home to his comfortable suburb, where a conversation with his neighbour reveals that he has taken a huge drop in pay and status by leaving a job in the computer industry to work as a high school teacher. The following day, he is better prepared for his task. He catches his students' attention by dressing as a deli assistant, making jokes and standing up to the gang members Finger Man and Angel. Escalante establishes a rapport with his students by appealing to their shared Mexican heritage. He tells them that "you burros have math in your blood," explaining that the Mayas invented

the concept of zero, which had eluded both the Romans and the Greeks. After a contentious staff meeting in which the other teachers display defeatist attitudes and question the students' ability to better themselves, Escalante addresses the class, warning them that they must work as hard as possible to overcome the obstacle of racism: "You already have two strikes against you. There are some people in this world who will assume that you know less than you do because of your name and your complexion, but math is the great equalizer."

The real turning point in Escalante's relationship with his students occurs when he takes them to a computer laboratory to see the practical applications of the mathematics he teaches. This journey represents a border crossing for the students, both in terms of leaving the barrio and encountering a world where success is possible. After this outing, Escalante becomes determined to teach his class calculus, so that they can sit the Advanced Placement Test. Escalante places strict demands on his students, even obliging them to sign a contract agreeing to his terms. They work in difficult circumstances, often with no family support, but they all pass the examination. Their elation is cut short, however, when the Educational Testing Service (ETS) accuses them of cheating. In the end, they are vindicated when they resit the exam and their original scores are reinstated.

Throughout the film, Escalante is portrayed as an ideal father figure, who is demanding but caring, with the best interests of his charges always on his mind. The brief vignettes that give the viewer some insight into the students' home lives demonstrate that their real parents are unable or unwilling to grant their children the support and encouragement offered by their teacher. The three principal female students, the maternal Lupe, the sensual Claudia and the timid Ana ostensibly represent typical stereotypes of Mexican-American females, as Goldman notes: "Each of these types derives from mainstream representations of Chicanas as Virgin, whore, and sidekick or supportive wife."¹⁷

The glimpses of Lupe's home life reveal that she is a mother figure not only to her three younger siblings but to her parents. She is unappreciated by her father, whom she has to ask for a kiss after she has made his packed lunch, while her exhausted mother returns from work and asks her to turn off the lamp so that she can rest, thus frustrating Lupe's efforts to study. Claudia is initially presented as the seductive Latina. She usually wears provocative clothing and she has a hectic social life. When she announces her plan to study for the Advanced Placement Test, her equally glamorous mother warns her that men do not like women who are too smart. She is appeased, however, when, contrary to expectations, Claudia says that she does not want to depend on "some dumb guy" for the rest of her life. Escalante's role as a father figure is most pronounced in the case of Ana. Escalante visits Ana's father's restaurant to try to persuade him to let her continue her

¹⁷ Irene S. Goldman, Chon A. Noriega, and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 88.

studies rather than forcing her to drop out of school to work as a waitress. Ana's father believes that education is a waste of time for Ana, as she would only get pregnant and not finish college. The men argue as Escalante insists that Ana should be free to make her own choices. Goldman suggests that Spanish is used in the film only as a means of simulating authenticity: ". . . dialogue in Spanish rarely contains narrative information. Rather, it functions as an ethnic marker, and relevant dialogue is spoken in English."¹⁸ This scene proves otherwise, however. When Ana's father loses his temper and asserts his position as Ana's rightful authority figure, he switches to Spanish, the language he is more comfortable with, saying: "Un momento, yo soy el padre de la niña, no usted." Ana ultimately takes up a college place, underlining the fact that Escalante was correct to call her biological father's right to determine her fate into question.

Angel is the only student whose allegiance to the alternative family created by Escalante and the students is debatable. This is largely because of his bonds with gang culture, which already provides him with an alternative family. Early in the film, Angel leaves class because Finger Man urges him to, but he admits afterwards to Escalante that this was a mistake. Although he is committed to learning, he does not want the gang to know; Escalante is sensitive to the conflicts faced by Angel. He gives him three copies of his books, one for home, one for school, and one for his locker, so that his friends never see him carrying them. Gradually, Angel distances himself from the negative

¹⁸ Irene S. Goldman, Chon A. Noriega, and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 88.

influence of the gang. He also becomes a more sympathetic character when he is seen to bear considerable family responsibilities, like Lupe, as he is shown caring for his fragile grandmother.

The many different experiences of the students and their diverse personalities highlight the need for Escalante as a unifying force in the surrogate family. This unifying role becomes clear after Escalante suffers a heart attack and is absent from the class for a period. No one manages to replace him as a leader, and the students engage in futile bickering, unable to cooperate as they did under his leadership. His return is crucial to their functioning as a team and their ability to confront the system that seeks to deny their academic prowess.

Stand and Deliver is an effective film that articulates the problems of class and racial struggle among Chicanos by blending these concerns into an entertaining, if rather overly didactic narrative. The film is more radical than it appears in suggesting that the nuclear family is not essential for success, although the importance of Chicano identity as a unifying force is reiterated throughout the film. Its greatest achievement lies in the suggestion that through the support of a family-like unit that does not have to be biologically determined, it is possible to balance ethnic identity with the assimilation needed to participate in the mainstream system symbolised by the Educational Testing Service.

American Me, like *Stand and Deliver*, shifts the locus of internal and external conflicts in the Chicano community from the family to a wider group, in this case a gang known as La Eme, the Mexican Mafia. With a budget of \$20 million from Universal Studios, *American Me* is the most expensive feature by a Chicano director. Fregoso, quoting Mike Davis, observes that this fact says a great deal about Hollywood's representation of Chicanos: "Hollywood is eager to mine Los Angeles Barrios and ghettos for every last lurid image of self-destruction and community holocaust."¹⁹ Olmos took advantage of this desire to portray Chicano Los Angeles as deviant, but *American Me* is not a typical sensational gang film, although it draws on other films from this genre. Like *La Bamba* and *Stand and Deliver*, *American Me* recounts a true story, which it conflates with the gang film genre to produce a uniquely revealing account of gang life that explores the darkest elements of Chicano prison culture without resorting to gratuitous violence.

The screenplay was written by Floyd Mutrux, who based the main character and narrator, Santana, on the real-life gang member Rudolfo "Cheyenne" Cadena. Cadena educated himself whilst in prison and become a fierce advocate of Chicano empowerment and cultural unity before being killed in a hit while attempting to broker a reconciliation between rival Latino gangs. The J.D. character in the film is based on Joe "Piglet" Morgan, who was of Slavic descent but spent his childhood in predominantly Chicano

¹⁹ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, pp. 124-5.

neighbourhoods in East Los Angeles and assumed a Chicano identity. The correspondence between the real-life gang members and their screen alter egos is clear, particularly in the case of J.D., whose outsider status is a frequent subject of comment and who loses his leg as a youth. Mutrux viewed *American Me* as “a great story of a warrior and a visionary.”²⁰ Olmos had a very different vision, however. He wanted to telescope the events in Mutrux’s script, omitting the redemptory note to make an explicitly harrowing cautionary tale, inserting scenes that showed members of the gang engaged in sodomy in a deliberate effort to hurt their pride.²¹

The film opens as voices in a prison are heard offscreen and a title appears, confirming that the film is inspired by a true story and justifying the violence that will shape the narrative: “The events depicted are strong and brutal, but they occur every day.” A woman’s voice comments on Santana’s dual personality, which is both innocent and dangerous, foreshadowing the conflict that will take place later in the film between Julie and Santana. The first properly realised scene is a flashback set in the summer of 1943 in Los Angeles. Santana’s mother, Esperanza, boards a tram, dressed in the exaggerated style of a *pachuca*, with long peroxide, quaffed hair and heavy makeup. She sits beside a man who looks at her in disgust and leaves his seat in an indication of the racial tensions in North America at this time, which are further suggested by the headline on a

²⁰ Nonny De La Peña, ‘In the Line of Fire,’ *Premiere*, (May 1997), p. 62.

newspaper read by another man: “Zoot Suiters Attack Military in Detroit.” Esperanza leaves the tram to meet a Chicano couple, and all three go to meet Pedro, Esperanza’s boyfriend and future husband, at the tattoo parlour, where he is getting a tattoo symbolising his love for Esperanza. As the trio admire his tattoo, chaos erupts in the street outside. A group of U.S. sailors burst in, attack the men and rape Esperanza and another woman. This flashback establishes a cycle of violence that will be repeated throughout the film, as Rob Canfield observes:

American Me appears a continuation of the conflicts and personas of *Zoot Suit*, bringing the tensions surrounding Latino communities from the 1940s-1980s to the 1990s and representing very current phenomena — such as drive-by shootings — as developments of the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943.²²

This scene also provides Santana’s motivation for joining a gang, as his father rejects him because of his North American paternity. As a consequence of this rejection, Santana is forced to create his own family through means of his gang. Fregoso disputes this interpretation of the desire of Chicano youths to form gangs. She rightly points out that *American Me* ignores other factors that lead to gang allegiance, such as material incentives, physical protection and excitement.²³ The evidence of *La Bamba* and *Stand*

²¹ Nonny De La Peña, *Premiere*, (May 1997), p. 62

²² Rob Canfield, ‘Orale Joaquín: Arresting the Dissemination of Violence in *American Me*,’ *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, (Vol.22, No.2, summer 1994), p. 62.

²³ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 1993, pp. 127-8.

and Deliver suggests that a lack of family identity leads young men to replicate family bonds in their gangs, however, as do first-person accounts of gang life.²⁴ Santana's motivation is made explicit, moreover, when he finally realises why his father rejected him after they accidentally meet at his mother's grave and his father sadly declares: "When you were born, I tried to love you. But I would always wonder which of those sailors' blood ran through your veins."

Pedro's rejection of Santana because he is not his biological father recalls the Mexican idea of *pureza de sangre*, a theme that is inextricably linked to sexual violence. Esperanza's misfortune echoes that of La Malinche, the mistress of the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortes, who symbolises the rape of Mexico by foreigners. Santana, who is literally the *hijo de la chingada*, lives out his destiny when he in turn is raped after being sent to duty hall for robbery. His subsequent murder of his assailant dooms him to a longer sentence and immediate transfer to an adult prison when he turns eighteen. His calm reaction introduces another key theme in the film, that of respect as crucial to the gang's macho posturing: "The respect I earned made me think I'd found the answer."

The rules that bind the interaction of the La Primera gang are evident from their conduct in the prison scenes. Respect is all-important to the gang members, who conform to a behaviour most notable in J.D., who has learned to be a Chicano. J.D. speaks and utters

²⁴ See Luis J. Rodríguez, *Always Running: Gang Days in L.A.*, (London: Marion Boyars, 1995)

commands in a low voice, hides his eyes behind sunglasses or cigarette smoke and rarely looks at the person he addresses, thereby refusing to reveal his emotions. The gang forget their rivalry with other Mexican gangs in prison, and their animosity turns instead to gangs of other races, such as the Black Guerrilla Family. This changes when Santana learns of a new Mexican gang on the outside, notably called La Familia, and he orders one of his gang, Pie Face, to kill its leader. When Pie Face refuses, he himself is killed by Little Puppet. Little Puppet, in turn, is eventually killed by his older cousin, Puppet, for foolish actions that lead to Santana's incarceration shortly after his release from prison. The interactions between the gang members do not recognise real family relations as being privileged over the bond they share. This bond is built on the appearance of force, which is ultimately more important to the gang's survival than any single member. Following the murder of a member of another prison gang, Santana remarks: "It's not just being weak we can't accept. It's about other people even thinking that we're showing weakness." As Canfield notes, the prison scenes centre "Chicano urban identity on a compound of "new" families that have replaced and displaced the traditional Latino family unit."²⁵

When Santana and his gang are released from prison, it quickly becomes apparent that the prison scenes served as a microcosm for life on the streets. The gang continues to

²⁵ Rob Canfield, *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, (Vol.22, No.2, summer 1994), p. 63.

engage in its most profitable enterprise, drug dealing. Their ineptitude is exposed in their dealings with Italian Mafia head Scagnelli, whom they threaten and warn to keep out of their territory. When he refuses, they kill his son, who is first gang raped by members of the gang still in prison. This horrifying event triggers mass destruction in the community, when Scagnelli, moved by revenge, releases pure heroin on the streets.

Santana's real crisis is precipitated by his relationship with Julie, a single mother he meets after being released. Julie stands up to Santana, rebuffing him for overreacting when a salesman in a shop is slow to serve him: "What, you thought he wasn't showing you respect, or what? Hey ese, the bato was just doing his pinche job, you know?" At first their relationship progresses smoothly. Julie teaches Santana to dance, something he missed out on because of being imprisoned since his youth, and takes him to the sea, where he has never been. Sexual violence once again emerges and sours their relationship, however. The scenes of the rape and murder of Scagnelli's son are interwoven with a scene showing Julie and Santana's first sexual encounter. Santana attempts to anally rape Julie in a violation that parallels the action in the prison. This scene has attracted a great deal of attention and has been interpreted variously by critics. The most important aspect of this incident, however, is its siting within the cycle of sexual violence that frames the film, both in terms of the rapes of Santana's mother, himself and Scagnelli's son. It also indicates Santana's sexual inadequacy, despite his

macho pretences, and his efforts to mask it through violence. Most importantly, it introduces the trope of the female survivor.

Julie is the only wholly positive character in the film. Santana is often sympathetic, particularly as the viewer is privy to his inner life through his narration, but his brutality is menacing. Julie's summation of his character as divided between naivete and pathology is correct, and this dichotomy is never resolved. Julie overcomes the death of her son through an overdose of the pure heroin, shields her younger son from becoming involved in street violence and gangs and even transcends the limitations of the barrio by enrolling in college courses. Towards the end of the film, she is seen preparing to go to class. In a significant gesture, she covers a small tattoo on her hand with makeup before leaving the house. This act is a symbolic rejection not only of Santana, whose gifts and letters she refuses to accept, but presumably of her own earlier gang interaction. In the words of Canfield:

...through Julie, Olmos offers both Santana and the audience a figure of hope (perhaps even a figurative resurrection of Esperanza), a vehicle that might truly arrest the disseminations of violence occurring in the film and the community.²⁶

Santana does not fare as well as Julie, largely because the positive influence she exerts on him comes too late. Julie refuses to communicate with him after her son's death, because

²⁶ Rob Canfield, *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, (Vol.22, No.2, summer 1994), p. 63.

she blames him for the drug problem in the community. He persists in writing to her nonetheless, for he has realised that she was his only hope of a real future: “You were my door to another life, where my seed may have been affirmed. I’ve brought back to this hole a breath of life, which I’m trying to use.” Julie is most clearly identified with the preservation of the traditional family unit at this point. Santana has learned that she could have offered him children and a fruitful life, while the gang offers only violence and sterility. As a result of her influence, Santana begins to read the books that he had earlier claimed to have read in prison, and he strives to distance himself from the gang. His sudden studiousness and isolation are perceived as the kind of weakness that he himself had earlier refused to tolerate, however. His gang members cannot allow him to retreat from their company, and they punish him by death.

Although the figure of Julie does provide some hope in an almost completely despairing narrative, the film’s conclusion calls the extent of her influence into question. Santana’s death is juxtaposed with a scene that shows Carlito, his little brother, participating in a random drive-by shooting. The correlation between these scenes has been interpreted by Kathleen Newman as follows: “His murder encapsulates the injustice of the gang system, the hope for the Chicano community within the system, and the current hopelessness for the barrio youth.”²⁷

²⁷ Kathleen Newman, ‘Reterritorialization in Recent Chicano Cinema,’ Chon A. Noriega, and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p. 99.

The film ends on a note of desolation as the cycle of violence is seen to continue into a new generation. *American Me* is undoubtedly bleak and at times disturbingly violent. Like other Chicano filmmakers, Olmos uses the devices of a true story and a typical Hollywood genre to effectively make his point, however. The violence once performed out of respect for the family constructed around the gang has evolved into a random violence perpetrated against unnamed families by anonymous youths.

Conclusion

Writing on the condition of the Mexican film industry in the mid-1990s, Paulo Antonio Paranagúa points to the continued dominance of Hollywood cinema and ponders whether Mexican cinema can truly influence the collective imagination.¹ The defection to Hollywood of directors such as Guillermo del Toro, whose first feature, *Cronos*, was a worldwide hit in 1993, seems to give reason for such pessimism. John King offers a similarly downbeat reflection on the future of Mexican cinema. Although he acknowledges the considerable achievements of post-1960s filmmakers, he expresses some doubt as to whether the gains they have made can be sustained. He concludes by signalling the strengths and limitations of Mexican cinema:

Commercial cinema has lost the vigorous strength of the Golden Age but still continues to churn out films for a loyal working-class or lumpen audience in the country and in the southern states of North America. Oppositional cinema still finds it difficult to break out of a mainly middle-class exhibition circuit or to do much more than throw stones at the pyramid of power.²

King's concerns are well founded. The Mexican filmmakers surveyed in the previous chapters are overwhelmingly from middle-class backgrounds, and their films tend to be shown almost exclusively to middle-class audiences. This is not to suggest that these filmmakers cannot represent the experiences of Mexicans outside their own social class, nor are all independent films doomed to limited distribution and screenings. The

¹ Paulo Antonio Paranagúa, 1995, p. 13.

² John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*, (London: Verso, 1990), p. 143.

overwhelming success of Alfonso Arau's *Como agua para chocolate*, despite its rather hostile reception among Mexican critics, performed the vital task of assuring Mexican cinemagoers that national films were worth seeing and could have resonance elsewhere. Although the film appears to be light-hearted and conventional, it is in fact rather subversive in its revisionist treatment of the Mexican Revolution, its reversal of gender roles, its questioning of the authority of the family and its depiction of positive cross-cultural engagement. These themes, which form the foundation of the present study, have proved fundamental to the creation of a Mexican cinema that provides a viable alternative to the idyllic images projected during the golden age era.

Filmmakers such as Arturo Ripstein have proved adept at appropriating genres ranging from the family melodrama to *film noir* in order to reveal aspects of Mexican life glossed over or ignored by previous generations of cinematographers. His contemporary Paul Leduc has provided a deeply personal account of the Mexican Revolution, while Jorge Fons and Nicolás Echevarría have based their films on the taboo subjects of the Tlatelolco massacre and the conquest, respectively. María Novaro's work is notable both for her distinctly feminist perspective and for her overturning of negative stereotypes of Chicanos. Jaime Humberto Hermosillo has captured social changes and new sexual mores in films such as *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*.

The groundbreaking work of this first generation of post-1960s directors is being continued and advanced by a new group of cinematographers. The XV Muestra de Cine Mexicano, held in Guadalajara in March 2000, provided ample evidence of the vitality of

Mexican cinema. The homage to Luis Buñuel at the centre of the festival underlined his continued relevance to contemporary filmmakers, while the screenings of films by young directors suggested that they were not reluctant to take up the challenge offered by Fons, Leduc and others in the explorations of themes that were formerly taboo. Salvador Aguirre's *De ida y vuelta* (2000) chronicles the experiences of a Mexican emigrant who returns from the United States keen to impress his community but becomes embroiled in crime and is forced to betray his indigenous heritage. Óscar Urrutia Lazo's *Rito terminal* is an experimental film that explores both the mysterious ceremonies of a remote indigenous community and the tragic outcome of a mother's overly possessive hold on her daughter. In a similar vein, Benjamin Cann's *Crónica de un desayuno* follows the travails of a deeply dysfunctional family barely held together by a self-sacrificing mother who is on the verge of mental and physical collapse. The hit of the festival was Luis Estrada's *La ley de Herodes*, a dark comedy about the moral degeneration of Juan Vargas, a scrapyard worker and PRI supporter who is made mayor of a backward, isolated and violent town. Vargas's apparent stupidity makes him seem the ideal puppet for the PRI politicians who entrust him with his dangerous and thankless job, but his ambition and progressive corruption lead him to become a potentate whose ruthless nature earns him unimagined political success.

Despite the fact that only six recent Mexican films were presented at the Guadalajara festival, the entries left no doubt that ambitious films are being made that continue the examination of the nation's identity, family structures and relationship with the United States initiated by the first wave of post-1960s filmmakers. There is still much to

achieve, however, as Jorge Molina Merino suggests in his introduction to the festival:

Seis producciones importantes que sin ser perfectas retomaron sin esfuerzo un público que nunca se había ido, sino que, simplemente, esperaba con ansia el momento en el que se le ofreciera de nueva cuenta productos de calidad más cercanos a su realidad. Pero seis películas no pueden hacer la diferencia, a pesar de las buenas intenciones falta mucho para que el cine mexicano vuelva a consolidarse como industria, y para que sus productos reflejen de manera contundente la identidad nacional, hay muchos problemas sociales que “el nuevo cine mexicano” ha tratado de evitar: Chiapas, la crisis económica, la inestabilidad política, los indígenas, entre muchísimos temas más posibles dentro de este fascinante país de tantos rostros y tantas realidades.³

Merino’s analysis is a penetrating summary of the challenges and possibilities that form a contemporary reality for Mexican filmmakers. The cinematic dominance of the 1940s and 1950s was in many ways exceptional and may never be repeated. In terms of the ideology of the films produced during these years, a reproduction of the so-called golden age may not even be desirable, moreover. Instead, as Merino suggests, Mexican cinematographers must look forward, drawing on the rich inspiration offered by their country’s diversity and attempting to reflect it in their work. The work of the first wave of post-1960s filmmakers has provided a valuable model to follow, and these filmmakers continue to produce outstanding work. By confronting the fascinating challenges posed by the complex society of Mexico, filmmakers can consolidate an industry that may not be mainstream but that provides a vibrant alternative to state-sanctioned constructions of nationhood and to the illusion of universality offered by Hollywood.

³ Jorge Molina Merino, ‘Quince años de trabajo,’ *Ocio*, (Guadalajara: No. 130, March 10, 2000), p. 6.

The future of Chicano filmmaking seems rather less hopeful than that of its southern neighbour. Post-1960s Mexican filmmakers had the enormous advantage of being part of a culture with a rich cinematic tradition that allowed them to react against it, often by recasting its techniques and genres. The most successful Chicano films have achieved something similar in their reappropriation of Hollywood genres to comment on the unique position of Chicanos in the United States. Luis Valdez's *La Bamba* is an outstanding example of how an American Dream story can be adapted to reflect the concerns of a marginalised group. Hollywood genres have also been used to powerful effect by Ramón Menéndez in *Stand and Deliver* and by Robert Rodriguez in *El Mariachi*. Gregory Nava's *El norte* is less inventive in its approach, but it stands as an important testimony to the difficulties faced by emigrants, as does Cheech Marin's refreshing, comedic examination of the subject. Nava's *My Family* is something of a disappointment, for it lacks a compelling narrative and seems interested only in illustrating the problems faced by Chicanos in an overly didactic manner. Edward James Olmos's *American Me* is an undeniably powerful reflection on gang life, but its resounding pessimism seems to suggest that no future is possible for Chicanos. Indeed, it also marks something of an impasse in Chicano filmmaking, as, with the exception of the independently made *El Mariachi*, it is the last Chicano feature to enjoy mainstream success.

Emilio García Riera makes the astute observation that the unique status of Chicanos as a distinct ethnic group near to its homeland but not completely assimilated in the United States leads to formidable challenges in the area of self-representation on the cinema

screen:

El cine chicano ha cumplido una gran labor: no sólo ha reivindicado en la medida de sus fuerzas a la muy considerable minoría norteamericana por ese cine representado, sino — más indirecta que directamente — a un país vecino, México (es una responsabilidad que no han tenido los negros, los judíos, los irlandeses o los italianos). Pero el cine chicano ha debido producirse casi siempre pensando en un público restringido: el de los propios chicanos.⁴

Kathleen Newman points to a further obstacle to Chicano filmmaking — divisions among the small group of filmmakers whose work constitutes Chicano cinema. She notes that Luis Valdez's wish to cast Laura San Giacomo in the role of Frida Kahlo in a film about the artist that was never made provoked outrage in the community. This objection to a decision that was presumably made for commercial reasons suggests both racial and gender issues, as women have yet to be represented adequately on either side of the camera in Chicano films.⁵ As this incident suggests, the greatest challenges facing the development of Chicano film are not artistic but financial. The so-called "Hispanic Hollywood" anticipated after the resounding success of *La Bamba* has yet to materialise. Newman observes that the legacy of Chicano filmmakers of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s has not led studios to trust in the appeal of Chicano films. Financing remains difficult, the emphasis on formulas and star recognition work to the detriment of even well-established directors, the casting of Latino actors in Latino roles remains contentious and there has not been an increase in Latino participation in the film industry.⁶ It

⁴ Emilio García Riera, 1990, p. 132.

⁵ Kathleen Newman, 'Reterritorialisation in Recent Chicano Cinema,' Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, pp. 104-105.

⁶ Kathleen Newman, Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López, eds., 1996, p.97.

unfortunately remains a truism that the ideology of the mainstream affects the kinds of representations of identity accepted as the norm in cinema. Only when North American studios recognise that the setting of a film in a Chicano milieu need not mark it as foreign will Chicano films be accepted in the mainstream. As the films examined here demonstrate, there is far more to Chicano culture than violence and gang warfare. The issues explored in Chicano film reflect a significant part of the history and cultural makeup of the United States, and it is only fitting that these films should adopt a far less marginalised position in both film production and criticism. A thriving underground Chicano film practice continues to produce short films and avant-garde works, however, and the achievements of Chicano filmmakers up to this point should not be overlooked. The increasingly less marginalised position of Chicanos and other Hispanics in the United States may ultimately lead filmmakers to build upon the promising start that their work over the past four decades represents.

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