

# MISSING THE MYTH: WHAT GETS LEFT OUT OF LATINO FILM ANALYSIS

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It is only in recent years that Latinos in the United States have been able to make feature films. The first such film to be generally recognized was Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, released in 1981, although there are some earlier, rarely seen low-budget Latino features. By the mid-1990s, however, there is a sufficient body of work that a number of university courses are now devoted to the subject, and there is a steadily growing body of critical literature. The purpose of this article is to point out some of the limitations of this literature, and to suggest certain directions for expanding its boundaries.

It is my contention that a great deal gets routinely left out of Latino film analysis because many analysts fail to appreciate the basic nature of the American feature film, of which Latino features are a sub-category. The questions that are asked of such films are often relatively unproductive, while more promising areas of inquiry are slighted. In order to lay some groundwork for my critique, I will start with an analysis of the nature of American features.

The following comments are couched in general terms. While I recognize that there are inevitable exceptions to these generalities, I believe that my characterization of American features corresponds to the vast majority of films which get to the point of theatrical distribution.

## *The Nature of Feature Films*

A feature film can be characterized as a narrative, or fiction film, greater than one hour in length. One of the first things that an academic discovers when he or she spends time with working filmmakers is that their discourse is strikingly different from that of scholarly film analysts. In particular, I want to call attention to the importance that filmmakers attach to the notion of whether a particular film element "works." Whether one is dealing with rewriting a script, directing an actor in a scene, or discussing the cutting of a sequence in the editing room, the same questions or statements are heard over and over: "Will this work?" "I don't think this is working." "This will never work." While no

one stops to define the meaning of “working,” there seems to be a general understanding among filmmakers as to what is meant by the term.<sup>1</sup>

I would say that when a filmmaker used the term “to work,” he/she is referring to whether that particular scene will evoke the desired response in the intended audience. The “desired response” I would further divide into two interrelated aspects: a) will it hold their interest?, and b) will it create the intended emotional reaction?

By examining the centrality of this concept of “working” for filmmakers, we can begin to appreciate one of the key differences between them and most academic film analysts. Feature filmmakers (and the better documentary filmmakers) are oriented toward *film as drama*, and at the core of drama is emotional response. Academics, on the other hand, address film primarily through a cognitive or intellectual lens, for reasons discussed in Graeme Turner’s *Film as Social Practice*.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that feature filmmakers are not concerned with conveying ideas of an intellectual nature. Indeed many are. However, most feature filmmakers are keenly aware that if their film does not “work” emotionally, neither will it “work” at any other level.

It is also important to note that this comment is intended to refer primarily to American features, and that there are differences in national film cultures and in the ways that features are financed in different countries. However, the overwhelming dominance of American features in the international market speaks to the effectiveness of American film techniques in reaching general audiences across cultural boundaries, and that effectiveness can not be explained away as merely a reflection of larger budgets. Indeed, the size of American film budgets is to a considerable degree a reflection of the historically greater success of American films in reaching large audiences.

The second distinguishing characteristic of the American feature film, I would argue, is that it is *mythic* in nature. My discussion of myth here generally follows along the lines laid down by Joseph Campbell in a number of works,<sup>3</sup> although others have developed similar concepts. A “myth” in this sense is a story, cast in metaphorical terms, which is intended to state a moral position concerning a universal aspect of human existence. While Claude Levi-Strauss<sup>4</sup> and others have described myths as performing multiple functions in society, I wish to focus here on the moral aspect, which I believe is the most central. In this sense, then, myths provide the moral compasses that allow individuals in

society to negotiate all of the truly universal aspects of human existence: birth, coming of age, sexuality, reproduction, aging, the loss of loved ones, coming to terms with one's own death, finding the courage to cope with fundamental life challenges, defining one's core meaning in life, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that American feature films are mythic in nature has gained increasing recognition among working filmmakers in recent times. Indeed, one of the more influential screenwriting texts of recent years is Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers & Screenwriters*.<sup>6</sup> Vogler, a story analyst for a number of major Hollywood studios, explicitly based his text on the works of Joseph Campbell, and illustrates his thesis with numerous references to mainstream feature film.

By contrast, academic film critics tend to focus much more on what I would characterize as the *ideological* aspects of film. Ideology, while certainly containing a moral dimension, tends to deal more at a social than an individual level, and is preoccupied with questions of social equality and inequality that are widespread in societies but do not have the historically universal aspect of myth. Myths typically transcend all national and historical boundaries, and are thus ideally suited to a cultural form—film—which seeks out the widest possible audience.

Graeme Turner, drawing on Levi-Strauss, has pointed out that feature films will typically create an opposition of moral values expressed in binary terms.<sup>7</sup> It is in the conflict between these moral positions that features typically express the central dramatic tension that, if successfully carried out, captures and holds the audience's attention. There is a further step in this process, however, that Turner does not sufficiently describe. In order to further the audience member's identification with the story, it is necessary to embody that opposition in the persons of a *protagonist* and an *antagonist*. The conflict between these two characters symbolizes the struggle between two moral positions, and the filmmaker will state his or her own position in the resolution of the conflict. I am necessarily stating this dramatic mechanism in its simplest form here. In many films, the situation is complicated by the presence of subplots and other narrative considerations.

While the dramatic and mythic aspects of features are the two most important considerations to keep in mind, there are two other interconnected points to be made. The first is that feature films are properly seen as an aspect of

popular culture rather than elite culture. As Turner has pointed out, the expansion of film studies in the 1960s and 1970s was marked by an influx into film analysis of scholars who had been trained in the analysis of literature, which is to say elite literature.<sup>8</sup> Many of the attitudes they brought with them can still be seen in academic courses and film theory texts today, such as the prestige accorded European directors and "auteurist" American directors whose films reach a very limited audience.

Much of Latino film analysis is now being done by scholars whose graduate training was in literature programs, and while there has been a growing orientation toward popular culture, there are still considerable holdovers from the biases of literary analysis. One is an exaggerated prestige often bestowed on Latin American auteurist directors, whose work is strongly European influenced. Another is the prizing of films characterized by formal structural innovation, even though such films may not reach much of an audience. Another is the constant referencing of ideas drawn from literary critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Raymond Williams. While this referencing can on occasion lead to a useful insight, its more important effect is to lead the analyst further and further from the perspectives of the filmmakers themselves.

This last point leads me to the fourth and final observation I wish to establish here: the almost total divorce of film critics from the practical considerations which all successful filmmakers constantly keep in mind. Critics seem to be almost totally unconcerned with the commercial success or failure of a film, an attitude no serious filmmaker can afford, whether independent or studio-based. Filmmakers want to reach a broad audience, they want people to see their films, and a great deal of what they do is aimed to that purpose. In addition, any filmmaker who wants to keep on making films, and all do, has to be concerned with whether his or her current film is going to make money.

This lack of practical concern on the part of scholars has limiting effects on their analyses. One is that there is almost no attention paid to questions of why some Latino films are more successful than others. Another is a lack of understanding of the choices that screenwriters and directors make in the way that stories are presented. In addition, the divorce of analysts from the world of the filmmaker often leads to outright misinterpretations. A filmmaker, for instance, might choose to film in black and white because it is cheaper, not in order to capture a particular aesthetic feeling. Non-professional actors might be used

because one can't afford to pay professionals, not for considerations of authenticity.

Until film scholars resolve to understand films from the perspectives of filmmakers, and to take into account real world constraints, they will continue to engage in misinterpretations and in unrealistic, unbalanced prescriptions for the types of Latino films they would like to see.

### *Story Paradigms*

The argument to this point is that American feature films are mythic in nature, which is to say that at their cores are metaphorical stories based on universal or near-universal aspects of human existence. Latino films, as one type of American film, draw upon the same fundamental stories as other features, although certain stories tend to be found more often because of conditions particular to Latino society and history.

The parameters of one such mythic story have been developed in great detail by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. That particular myth, referred to as "the hero's journey," is the basis for Vogler's screenwriting text, cited above. As is by now well known, George Lucas was strongly influenced by Campbell's book in creating the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983). In later years, Campbell would sometimes show clips from *Star Wars* to illustrate his points.

The hero's journey is, however, only one of a number of these core myths, which I shall refer to as story paradigms. While I am not aware of any definitive cataloguing of these paradigms, I will list below some of the more obvious and popular ones, and list some well-known films that illustrate their use. It should be kept in mind that a given feature film may combine more than one paradigm in its story.

For purposes of identification, I will give each story paradigm the name of its best-known incarnation within the Western tradition, since that is what we are most likely to recognize. Equally suitable illustrations could be culled from non-Western cultural traditions, since all are based on recurring human conditions and dilemmas.

The paradigm of "Romeo and Juliet" is based on the situation of lovers whose union is opposed by their social groups. The clans of Shakespeare's version are most likely to be replaced nowadays by ethnic groups. In *West Side*

*Story* (1961), for example, the Juliet character is played by Maria, a New York Puerto Rican woman, while Romeo's role is assigned to an ostensibly Polish American man.<sup>9</sup> More recently, the American feature *Zebrahead* (1992) and the Australian *Flirting* (1990) have explored this same paradigm with Black and Anglo characters. *Mississippi Masala* (1992) puts a slightly different spin to the story within the American context by making both lovers members of minority groups.

"Beauty and the Beast" remains one of the most popular story paradigms in American films, and not just in the literal retelling. The core story here deals with the necessity for the female character to effect a transformation in a "beastly" male in order to make their union possible. The quintessential American romantic comedy of recent years, *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), is so closely patterned on this model it might almost as well have been titled "When Hairy Met Sally." *Pretty Woman* (1990) effectively combines this paradigm with a Cinderella story. *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989) is notable not only for putting the story in a racial context but for switching roles and making the female character the one in need of transformation. Within a Latino context, *Salt of the Earth* (1953) provides a case where the film's major subplot revolves around a Beauty and the Beast conflict.

Greek myth is the source for another popular paradigm, the Odyssey story. Homer's epic tells of the warrior-king who spent ten years trying to return home after the Trojan War. Perhaps the best known Odyssey story of more recent times is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), but variations on the theme are legion. One of the more interesting contemporary film versions can be found in the politically incorrect *Falling Down* (1993), wherein Michael Douglas spends a day walking across Los Angeles, laying waste to all he encounters. Within the Latino context *Born in East L.A.* (1987), discussed below, presents a clear example of an Odyssey paradigm.

If there is a mother of all paradigms, and I believe there is, it is to be found in the basic "death-rebirth" story. Within the Western tradition the core telling of this paradigm is that of the death and resurrection of Christ. I think it is accurate to say that the immense resonance of this story, in both religious and secular versions, lies in its correspondence to the annual seasonal cycle in nature, as well as to the fundamental cycle of birth, growth, maturity, death, and recomposition of all life forms. Generally speaking, the form that this para-

digm takes in films is that of spiritual or emotional death and rebirth. However, in the recent comedy-fantasy *Groundhog Day* (1993), the story is given a more literal spin by having the protagonist relive a particular day until he gets it right. By making use of this dramatic device, Bill Murray's character is able to die a physical death and yet continue to finish the story. The filmmakers here cleverly amalgamated the death-rebirth theme with a "Beauty and the Beast" story.

The highly successful American feature *Ghost* (1990) also made use of this story paradigm, but with an interesting twist. Here the main character literally dies and is reborn as a ghost, but one who is still emotionally dead, as he was in life. Only by having the ghost be emotionally reborn is the story brought to a satisfying conclusion.

Several Latino films have drawn upon this story. Among them is the previously mentioned *Zoot Suit* (1981), where the character of Hank Reyna must die spiritually in prison before he can be reborn as a more complete human being. The films *American Me* (1992) and *El Norte* (1983), which is discussed below, also fall into this general category, as does the New York Puerto Rican *Crossover Dreams* (1985).

The Bible is of course a source of other story paradigms within the Western tradition. The story of David and Goliath can be seen as a paradigm of the underdog drama, which takes such diverse filmic variations as the classic western, *High Noon* (1952), the revisionist western, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), and the many-sequeled *Rocky* (1976) fight pictures. Among Latino-oriented films, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982) stands as a clear example, as does Robert Rodriguez's low-budget independent actioner *El Mariachi* (1993).

The Celtic legends of King Arthur are another rich source of story paradigms. Chief among them is the love triangle story, embodied in King Arthur, his queen Guinevere, and her lover Lancelot. In its classic and most frequently encountered form, the triangle consists of two men and one woman. One of the most famous films of all time, *Casablanca* (1942), provides a close parallel. Here the woman in the middle is the wife of a powerful political figure, as in the Arthurian legend, but her passion is directed at her charismatic lover. As in the original story, the conflict is portrayed as one between duty and love. A very similar dramatic set-up drives the more recent *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). *The Age of Innocence* (1993) reverses the sexual equation by putting the

man between two women, but the moral choice is essentially the same. Interestingly enough, in almost all versions of this story, duty wins out over love.

The Arthurian story of the search for the Holy Grail has also inspired a number of feature films. *The Fisher King* (1991) is a self-conscious retelling of that story, but less literal versions can be seen in such films as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989).

The examples of story paradigms given here are not intended as an exhaustive list. Rather, they are presented to establish the argument that American features are basically mythic in nature. Most features, and particularly the more successful ones, have at their heart one of the classic story paradigms of the Western cultural tradition. While as adults we snicker at children's desire to have a story told over and over, our own behavior is not that different. We also like to hear the same stories. The main difference is that adults like to have minor variations in the telling.

In the remainder of this paper I will turn my attention to particular American Latino features in order to illustrate some of the paradigms noted. My contention is that an appreciation of the mythic nature of the feature film leads to questions and insights that are routinely left out of most analyses of these films. In the process, I will also attempt to point out other limitations of the critical literature that has been produced up to this point.

The three films I have chosen to concentrate on are *La Bamba* (1987), *El Norte*, and *Born in East L.A.* One reason for selecting these films is that they are among the most popular and most widely discussed Latino features. As such, they have had considerable impact on audiences and on other Latino filmmakers. *La Bamba* and *Born in East L.A.* were both major commercial successes, while *El Norte* did well at the box office given its small budget and its preponderance of non-English dialogue.

A second reason for focusing on these particular films is that there is a significant body of published critical literature for each of them. In addition, each of the films illustrates the use of a different major story paradigm.

### *Interpreting Latino Films: La Bamba*

There is a scene in the feature film *Barcelona* (1994) in which the two main American characters discuss literature. Their exchange goes like this:<sup>10</sup>



FRED: Huhn . . . Maybe you could clarify something for me. While I've been, you know, waiting for the fleet to show up, I've read a lot and—

TED: Really?

FRED: —and one thing that keeps cropping up is this about “subtext.” Songs, novels, plays—they all have a subtext, which I take to mean a hidden message or import of some kind.

*Ted nods.*

FRED: So subtext we know. But what do you call the meaning, or message, that's right there on the surface, completely open and obvious? They never talk about that. (Using his hand as a visual aid.) What do you call what's *above* the subtext?

TED: The text.

FRED: (Pause) Okay. That's right. . . . But they never talk about that.

My reaction to academic film analysis is often similar to Fred's. Much of the time it seems that the writer is trying so hard to come up with a sophisticated, non-obvious reading of the film that the more manifest content is virtually ignored. In the following comments I shall try to avoid this pitfall, which I believe can result in serious misreadings.

The major critical commentary on Luis Valdez's *La Bamba* has been developed by Rosa Linda Fregoso, so I will use her analysis as my point of departure.

*La Bamba* is based on the life-story of Ritchie Valens, whose meteoric musical career was cut short by an airplane accident in 1959, when he was only 17. In writing the script, Valdez chose to put a major dramatic emphasis on the relationship between Valens and his older brother, Bob Morales.

In *The Bronze Screen*, the first book-length study of Chicano cinema, Rosa Linda Fregoso devotes considerable attention to the analysis of *La Bamba*. Since her argument is detailed and complex, I can provide only a distillation here of what I consider her major points. Essentially, Fregoso locates this film within a tradition of discourse most immediately traceable to the Chicano political movement of the 1960s and 1970s, with its heavy emphasis on questions of cultural identity. She states “By interweaving identity politics with other aspects of narrative discourse, Valdez's films *Zoot Suit* and *La Bamba* established themselves as major documents of Chicano cultural identity politics.”<sup>11</sup>

She goes on to argue that Valdez in this film posits Chicano identity as a social problem. Ritchie is “coded” in positive terms: he is highly successful in his career, he is the good son, he is responsible, supportive, and a good provider.

Bob is overwhelmingly coded in negative terms: he is a failure, he abuses his girlfriend, he is involved in substance abuse and criminal activity, and is generally irresponsible. However, Bob also represents cultural authenticity—he speaks Spanish and is in touch with his Mexican/indigenous cultural roots. The problem is that “Social mobility is barred for Chicanos who, like Bob, have resisted incorporation into dominant culture, for those who have retained their ethnic and cultural beliefs and values, their ‘Chicanismo.’ The more one is culturally assimilated, the greater the possibility of social mobility, as in the case of Ritchie.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, “*La Bamba* re-configures Chicano cultural identity in either/or terms. The only space for cultural vitality and ‘Chicanismo’ lies on the margins . . . *La Bamba* represents marginality (Bob’s position) as a space of deviance and social pathology.”<sup>13</sup>

While applauding what she sees as Valdez’s critique of melting-pot ideology, Fregoso would have liked to see the film make a stronger case for the significance of cultural affirmation and engage in a larger critique of dominant ideology. She concludes her review of Valdez’s films by saying:<sup>14</sup>

The positive feature of cultural nationalism is the fact that Movement intellectuals excavated a historical past and constructed and reconstructed memories of a Mexican culture of struggle and resistance in order to develop a cohesive group identity that would shield them from racist ideology and oppression. Often, however, their retelling of stories re-constructed Chicano identity in a debilitating fashion, as the site of crisis and pathology. Given that cultural identities are not handed down as essences, the task remains for an identity politics able to re-construct subjectivities in ways that empower people as creative subjects of history. Cinematic representation plays a formidable role in such a project. . . .

The major problem that I see here is that Fregoso is giving *La Bamba* an almost exclusively ideological reading. She is evaluating the film against the backdrop of issues that emerged from the Chicano Movement, and not seeing it as a drama. It is certainly true that Luis Valdez was an activist and even a Movement ideologist, and he does indeed bring issues from that experience into all of his work. However, interpreting his films only in ideological terms creates a serious imbalance and even misreading of those works. Valdez is also a dramatist, and as such is interested in creating a film that “works” dramatically. He wants to tell a good story, one which moves people. It is also important to keep in mind where Valdez was in terms of his career as a filmmaker. *Zoot Suit* had been a critical success for the most part, but not a commercial

success. He very much needed at that point to make a film which was a box-office success, and that meant coming up with a good story that would reach a general audience.

The first dramatic problem Valdez had to face was that the life of Ritchie Valens provided little obvious material for a gripping story. Success had come too quickly for Valens, and he had died early. Valdez comments:<sup>15</sup>

The problem is that Ritchie had been dead for thirty years, and he was a cherished memory. Nobody wanted to say anything bad about him . . . "yeah, he was a nice guy, nicest guy who ever lived." I kept asking, C'mon, didn't he ever do anything wrong, he must have been human?...I wanted to know, Did he ever get laid, did he do drugs, how was he human? I was getting nowhere. It was all *nada*, 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.

In seeking his story, Valdez was led in a mythological direction, but in a complicated sort of way. In interviews, Valdez equates the two brothers with the Aztec gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca. He says "There's [a] god of culture, Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, who . . . surfaces in *La Bamba* as the figure of Ritchie Valens. He's an artist and poet and is gentle and not at all fearful. When my audiences see *La Bamba*, they like that positive spirit."<sup>16</sup> Bob, on the other hand, is identified with Tezcatlipoca, who envied and corrupted Quetzalcoatl, and who introduced *pulque*, an alcoholic drink, into the world.<sup>17</sup>

However, while unacknowledged by Valdez, it would appear the true operative myth here is the story of Cain and Abel. The biblical story would not only be familiar to American audiences, but it is tied in with a universal or near-universal aspect of family life, sibling rivalry. Here is a story that almost anyone might relate to in personal terms, perhaps even Luis Valdez and his less-famous musician brother Danny Valdez, who has a small role in *La Bamba*.<sup>18</sup> Valdez has been quoted as saying "Below the foundations of our Spanish culture, we still sense the ruins of an entirely different civilization."<sup>19</sup> In this particular case, it seems that that relationship has been inverted. Beneath the overlay of Aztec mythology, I sense the presence of a Christian fable that Valdez would

certainly have learned much earlier than the story of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca.

In the biblical story, of course, Abel is slain by his jealous brother. Ritchie Valens, on the other hand, died in an airplane crash. On the surface, there seems to be little similarity, until we see how Valdez has told his story. He has Ritchie wearing a rattlesnake charm around his neck, a talisman bestowed on him by a Mexican shaman. The talisman is supposed to protect Ritchie, who has had nightmares about dying in a plane crash. During their climactic fight, Bob inadvertently tears the talisman from Ritchie's neck, and right before he does so he yells "I'll kill you."

The conflict and love-hate relationship between Ritchie and Bob provides the primary source of dramatic tension in the film, and elements of it are interwoven throughout the story. At the very beginning, for instance, we find Bob seducing Ritchie's quasi-girlfriend, Rosie. Bob's subsequent conflicts with Rosie heighten the tension between him and Ritchie, since they wind up living in close proximity.

At the same time, Bob's relationship with Ritchie is complex and not uniformly negative. Bob serves as Ritchie's confidant and informal advisor, and steps in at several crucial points in Ritchie's career to back him up. He is also present at Ritchie's first major recording session. Bob is the one who takes Ritchie on a spiritual journey to Mexico, where Ritchie receives the talisman from the shaman. The trip is also portrayed as the source of Ritchie's inspiration to record the song that would become his biggest hit, "La Bamba."

The relationship between the brothers enters in again right before Ritchie's death, when the two brothers reconcile via an emotional telephone conversation. By then, however, Ritchie's fate has been sealed. Bob remains in possession of the talisman, which he uses as a rattle to amuse his infant daughter. Presumably it will be passed on to her, as the representative of the next generation.

In the screenplay which Valdez wrote for the film, the film closes some thirty years later with Bob reminiscing about Ritchie, keeping his memory alive. This scene was cut from the final version, however.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly enough, both Fregoso and another analyst of the film, Victor Fuentes, refer to the story of Cain and Abel in their critiques. Both do so only in passing, and neither points out the significance of this myth in structuring the story and providing the central dramatic tension of the film.<sup>21</sup>

### *Identity Politics and Transculturation*

In focusing on the mythic element in *La Bamba*, I do not mean to imply that identity politics is not also a significant aspect of the film. Valdez does take a position here, but I do not believe that it is the position which Fregoso attributes to him. Rather than being one end of a negative polarity of assimilation/success vs. cultural resistance/failure, Ritchie Valens represents a model of success through transculturation, or cultural fusion. While Valdez has often spoken favorably about assimilation, the assimilation he has in mind does not seem to mean a wholesale discarding of one's cultural orientation. In one interview he states:<sup>22</sup>

The implication . . . is the melting pot somehow is the reduction of something that was more vital than something outside the pot. You throw in something and it all gets mixed up and becomes more bland. I submit that the opposite might also be true—that whatever you pour into the pot adds another flavor. I used to think assimilation meant absorption, that you would no longer be yourself. But I think we are what we eat, so if the melting pot eats us, it's gonna become us, also, in addition to whatever it is now.

Whatever the sociological validity of Valdez's perspective,<sup>23</sup> it seems clear that what is being proposed here is more of a cultural fusion than a straightforward cultural substitution. The key, after all, to Valens' success as presented in the film is his taking of a traditional Mexican cultural form, the song "La Bamba," and blending it with a United States cultural form—rock and roll. Indeed, I would press the argument further and say that Valdez is proposing transculturation as a solution both to a social dilemma and to an artistic dilemma. Ritchie Valens here functions as a symbol of the transcultural experience that Valdez himself is essaying in this film—telling a story about a Chicano subject in a way that will work for both Chicano and mainstream audiences. As Valens' music crossed over to a general audience, so did Valdez's film. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Valens' music in the film was performed by that quintessential transcultural crossover band, Los Lobos.

The "appropriation" of Valens' strategy by Valdez was no doubt facilitated by Valdez's psychological identification with his subject. Valdez and Valens are, after all, contemporaries, with Valdez born in 1940 and Valens in 1941. Valdez gave Ritchie his own migrant farmworker roots, although according to his biographer "Ritchie was *never* a farmworker or migrant laborer."<sup>24</sup> Valdez is quoted in an interview as saying "Here's a kid that had a guitar, who composed music,

who loved to perform. That's my story as well. That's what I used to do. I mean, I wasn't a rock and roll singer. I was something a little bit different—I was a ventriloquist actually. . . . So I understood what it was like to suddenly have a reputation and be poor at the same time. I understood that immediately about Ritchie."<sup>25</sup>

In yet another interview, Valdez says "There's that symbolism in *La Bamba*—it's pre-Colombian, but it's also very accurate in terms of the way that I view my own life. I've crawled through many of my own dead skins."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one can almost see Luis Valdez as Ritchie Valens in a new skin—Quetzalcoatl reborn yet again.

### *Ideology, Drama and Polysemy*

While Luis Valdez does stake out a position on the ideological question of identity politics in *La Bamba*, this says nothing about why the film was so successful with both Latino and mainstream audiences. Rather, this question must be addressed in dramatic terms. It is my contention that most people do not go to films in order to sort out their intellectual dilemmas, but in order to have an emotional experience, and to have familiar stories retold and familiar values reinforced (or, at most, marginally challenged).

The emotional effectiveness of *La Bamba* derives from the fact that it is an old and universal story, skillfully told in a modern version. Our emotions are engaged through the dramatic tension that ensues from the conflict between brothers who are portrayed as complex, flawed, and yet ultimately sympathetic characters. The emotional highpoint of the film comes toward the end, as it should, with Ritchie's death. We feel his death so strongly because it reminds us of our own mortality, and our own longings for immortality, but also because he was a talented and courageous individual who died before he was able to consummate either his musical career or his love for Donna.

A number of commentators on this film have focused on Valens' success story as the core dramatic element. Rafael Perez-Torres, for example, characterizes the film in the following way: "*La Bamba* rests upon a tried and true Hollywood format: the audience wants to see an uplifting story about the success of a sympathetic and winning underdog."<sup>27</sup> Luis Valdez himself reinforces this view when he states in an interview ". . . this is a rock and roll story and . . . it's got a lot of human grit. . . . In many ways a classic American

experience: Poor boy using his talents to break through."<sup>28</sup> It is in fact the case that Ritchie's success story provides the formal plot line around which the action of the film is structured, and there is a touch of the David-and-Goliath myth to be found here. However, there is little dramatic tension located there because the music industry Goliath succumbs too easily to Valens' assault.

It is for this reason that the "real" story of *La Bamba* is found in the Ritchie-Bob subplot, where the central dramatic tension plays itself out. A secondary reason is that the experience of sibling rivalry is far more universal for audiences than that of scaling the peaks of artistic and commercial success. As Victor Valle has noted, in reflecting on *La Bamba*, "It became apparent to me . . . that Valdez, like other Latino bricoleurs adept at juggling several languages and cultures, was capable of telling several stories simultaneously."<sup>29</sup>

Put another way, Luis Valdez is able to have it both ways here by employing a strategy of dramatic polysemy, allowing a viewer to focus where he/she chooses. However, it is my contention that a dramatic as opposed to an ideological reading clearly reveals the core story to be sibling rivalry—the Cain and Abel myth. By centering the dramatic tension here, Valdez as writer and director guides us to a "preferred reading" of the text, one that allows us to understand the emotional impact and the general appeal of this story.<sup>30</sup>

### *Another Film, Another Myth: El Norte*

Another influential Latino film of the 1980s was Gregory Nava's and Anna Thomas' *El Norte* (1983). Given the film's influence and its excellent quality, there has been relatively little critical commentary devoted to it.

*El Norte* tells the story of a Guatemalan Mayan brother and sister who are forced to flee their remote village because of repression from an alliance of government forces and large landowners. After their father is killed and their mother "disappeared" by soldiers, Enrique and Rosa embark on a dangerous journey through Mexico, eventually reaching Los Angeles in the fabled "North." Once there they are set up in menial jobs by their Chicano landlord, who also acts as an informal labor contractor. Although both are harassed at their job sites by "la migra," the Immigration and Naturalization Service, they seem to be getting by until Rosa comes down with an infection brought on by rat bites suffered during their journey north. At the dramatic climax of the film, Enrique must choose between remaining at her side or leaving for a Chicago job that

promises economic mobility and the possibility of legalization. Although he chooses to stay with her, Rosa dies, and at the end of the story Enrique finds himself trapped in a dead-end manual laborer job.

Like Luis Valdez, Gregory Nava represents the generation of Latino filmmakers who were strongly influenced by the ideological currents of the Chicano Movement. The search for roots that was part of that movement led many artists and other cultural workers back to the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas, and especially to the Aztecs and Mayans. In much the same way that Valdez drew on Aztec mythology in telling the story of Ritchie Valens, Nava decided to frame his story of contemporary Mayan refugees within a Mayan world view. From the *Popol Vuh* creation myth and other Mayan myths, Nava drew the concept of the two heroes of his story, a great deal of his symbolism, and a basic dualistic concept of the world. He also incorporated a strong cyclical element into the structure of the story, again drawing on Mayan concepts. At the end of the film, for instance, Enrique finds himself trapped much as his father was at the beginning of the film, and we see a juxtaposition of circular images from the beginning and end of the story (a water wheel, a cement mixer).

While acknowledging the multilayered complexity of *El Norte*, Rosa Linda Fregoso chose to focus her critique on the treatment of gender roles.<sup>31</sup>

As details of Indian nobility and cultural tradition are figured visually in Rosa's character as well as in her mother's, rather than in Enrique's, women then symbolize a distinct cultural system. Read allegorically, Rosa's death represents the impossibility of the survival of culturally distinct modes of apprehending social reality within another cultural system. The burden of cultural reproduction thus resides in the woman, in her spirituality and existence. Rosa symbolizes a "people's" tradition. This Western (Enlightenment) distinction between men, as agents of their own individual story, and women, as agents of cultural reproduction and tradition, is maintained and emphasized by the parallel structure of the narrative. Whereas the filmmakers intended to render a new-Mayan (alternative) vision of an indigenous worldview, *El Norte's* representation follows the conventional Western division of Nature/Culture, positing female subjectivity in the unknown, Mystery, Nature, and woman as the ground for cultural reproduction and maintenance.

By contrast, Victor Fuentes reads *El Norte* as an attack on the notion of the United States as the land of liberty, welcoming the oppressed of other lands. He argues that *El Norte*, as well as *La Bamba* and *Born in East L.A.*, represent a



culture of resistance and affirmation in opposition to the modes of representation of Latinos in mainstream films.<sup>32</sup>

Another critic, Christine List, feels that the film suffers from a melodramatic style and a reliance on stereotyped villains (the Guatemalan landowners, the I.N.S.). She argues that the structure of the story will keep all but the most sophisticated viewers from seeing a connection between the oppression experienced by Enrique and Rosa's family in Guatemala and the exploitation that they encounter in the United States. She would like to have seen the film deal more overtly with questions of imperialism, and provide a "more penetrating analysis of prolonged impoverishment in the Third World. . ." <sup>33</sup> She concludes that a better ending would have had Enrique return to Guatemala to join the revolutionary forces there. Overall, her analysis represents just the sort of overly ideological approach that I am arguing against here, one that ignores the real-world constraints on feature filmmakers and is almost totally divorced from their mindset.

There is no question that *El Norte* provides ample material for ideological readings. The filmmakers are clearly sympathetic to the "illegal immigrants" so demonized in recent American political rhetoric. But the film goes well beyond simply offering sympathy to the unfortunate, in that it locates the source of Rosa's and Enrique's travails in the workings of an increasingly globalized capitalist political economy. The exploiters of Indian labor in Guatemala are clearly identified as large landowners, "outsiders" who took over fertile lands from the indigenous communities. Anyone with knowledge of Central American countries knows that those "outsiders" are usually multinational companies and their local subsidiaries. At the same time, the exploitation of immigrant labor in the metropolis is also clearly delineated in the workings of such employers as textile sweatshops and large construction companies, complete with minority labor contractors and other intermediaries.

However, what I want to stress here is that the presence of these themes is not what makes the story "work" for most audiences. In fact, the filmmakers recognized that the perception of a film as "political" can severely limit its audience. As David Rosen has outlined in his account of the making of this film, "the filmmakers and distributors consciously attempted to depoliticize *El Norte's* image. The filmmakers had strong beliefs regarding the crucial issues posed by the film, but they didn't want it pigeonholed as a political movie. As Deutchman

[one of the distributors] pointed out, a film identified as political tends to be restricted in its audience appeal."<sup>34</sup>

Despite the film's political messages, its lack of recognizable stars in the U.S., and the fact that it is mostly in Spanish (with some English and a Mayan language), *El Norte* did quite well at the box-office and in home video release.<sup>35</sup> That it did so is a testament to the success of the filmmakers in couching the ideological elements in a dramatic story that worked emotionally for its audiences, and that is built around a universal mythic story paradigm.

But what is that story paradigm? Despite the borrowings from classic Mayan myths, the answer is not to be found there, since American audiences are almost totally unfamiliar with those mythic sources. In an interview with Gregory Nava, he indicated that the only person he had talked to who really understood the formal mythic dimension of the film was Luis Valdez.<sup>36</sup>

My contention is that the fundamental story paradigm underlying *El Norte* is the most basic of all core stories, that of death-rebirth. There is a sort of parallel here with *La Bamba*, in that beneath the overt indigenous mythic symbolism and the ostensible mythic source, there is a more familiar paradigmatic myth that serves to orient the audience to what the film is "really" about at a personal, universal level that digs beneath ideology to rest on a generally recognized moral bedrock.

The primary death-rebirth trajectory here is that of Enrique. At the climax of the story he is set to leave for the promised foreman's job in Chicago when his sister's friend Nacha brings him news of Rosa's illness. Nacha pleads with Enrique to go to Rosa, but he initially refuses, knowing that he will lose the economic opportunity if he does not leave immediately. When he asks Nacha to stay with Rosa in his place, Nacha responds in disgust that while Rosa may be gravely ill, Enrique is already dead. In a spiritual sense, of course, she is correct, and the story to that point has tracked the process by which the displaced immigrants have gotten further and further removed from the communal ties that bound them to each other back in their home village. When Enrique has a change of heart and chooses to stay by Rosa's side, he suffers economically but regains his humanity, and is in a sense spiritually reborn.

While Enrique's trajectory provides the central character arc<sup>37</sup> of the story, the filmmakers have cleverly provided a second death-rebirth journey, that of Rosa. At a certain point in the story we see her cutting her ties to the past by

taking on a new hairdo and starting to dress in a contemporary “fashionable” style, much to her brother’s disapproval and amazement. Right at the end of the film, however, we see Enrique gazing off into space, and through his inner eye we see Rosa back in the Guatemalan village, reborn, in traditional attire, returned to the only place where her true spiritual self can survive. Her journey is foreshadowed at the beginning of the film in yet a third death-rebirth cycle, at the funeral of their father. On that occasion, Rosa sings the following song:

*It's not true that we  
Come here to live . . .  
We come only  
To sleep, to dream . . .  
All things are lent to us,  
in passing . . .  
Tomorrow or the next day,  
As you desire, giver of life,  
We shall go home . . .*

So while the particulars of the *Popol Vuh* and other Mayan sources may not be familiar to Western audiences, the cyclical concept of time which the filmmakers derive from those texts dovetails perfectly with the death-rebirth paradigm with which those audiences might be acquainted. This is a testament to the universal nature of those core stories.

### *The Modern Odyssey: Born in East L.A.*

After *La Bamba*, the most popular Latino film has been Cheech Marin’s *Born in East L.A.* It tells the story of a Chicano from East Los Angeles, Rudy, played by Marin, who is picked up in an I.N.S. raid on a factory and taken to Mexico when the immigration officials refuse to believe that he is a citizen. The rest of the story is taken up with Rudy’s attempts to return home, and the comic misadventures he has in the process. While in Tijuana he becomes romantically involved with Dolores, a woman from El Salvador. Eventually Rudy organizes a large number of would-be immigrants and leads a mass charge on the border, allowing him and Dolores to reach L.A.

One of the most extended commentaries on this film has been made by

Rosa Linda Fregoso, who provides a number of valuable insights. One of her emphases is on the manner in which Marin, as writer/director, “reverses the dominant society’s codes of positive/negative value,<sup>38</sup> and in so doing parodies both social and cinematic depictions of the Chicano as “other.” She notes one particular sequence where Rudy attempts to cross the border by stowing away in the motor home of two middle class white Americans, only to end up in jail when the couple is busted as drug smugglers.

Fregoso also astutely notes Marin’s complex cultural orientation in other respects. For example, while he shares with other Chicano and Latin American filmmakers a respect for everyday popular culture (“lo popular”), he is one of the few to also acknowledge the impact of commodified popular culture on the lives of people. There are several instances in the film where he incorporates or references American popular music, including his parody of Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA.”<sup>39</sup>

She goes on to note the significance of border imagery in Marin’s film, finding points of similarity here with *La Bamba*:<sup>40</sup>

In terms of the subject positioning of its main characters, Rudy and Ritchie, both films play with the precarious space of in-between-ness, the border, thereby positing forms of transgression in which existing borders forged in domination can be redefined. Figuratively, Chicano subjectivity is located in the difference from dominant white (U.S.) and Mexican cultures, but also in the similarities with both systems. Thus, *Born in East L.A.* and *La Bamba* portray the border as a site where identities and cultures intersect productively. Both films create the conditions for their main subjects, but also for their spectator subjects, to become border crossers.

In another major analysis of *Born in East L.A.*, Chon Noriega focuses on the political and cultural implications of Marin’s film.<sup>41</sup> The themes that Noriega identifies include a critique of United States hysteria about immigration and the English-Only initiative in California; the film’s insistence on Chicano “nativeness” in the U.S.; a reframing of the dialogue about immigration to take into account its multinational nature; and a shift from Chicano nationalism to a pan-Latino identity.

While both Noriega’s and Fregoso’s analyses are of significant help in deciphering the complex thematic meanings in a film which on first impression appears to be merely a light-hearted entertainment, their discussions are limited in ways that parallel my commentaries on *La Bamba* and *El Norte*. In

particular, I believe that they devote insufficient attention to the factors that make *Born in East L.A.* work as a drama, and that help us understand why it was as successful as it was. I am convinced that the film's appeal to a broad audience can not be explained in terms of its political perspective or cultural critique, but must be addressed through a more detailed exploration of the nature of its core story and of the workings of its narrative structure. As with the other films, such an exploration can begin with the identification of the basic story paradigm.

Interestingly enough, there has been a discussion of this film that attempts to locate it within a mythic paradigm.<sup>42</sup> In his article, Eddie Tafoya argues that "the real brilliance of the film is not as much a matter of politics as of allegory, as *Born in East L.A.* is essentially the story from the Book of Exodus of the flight of Jews from Egypt into the Promised Lands—rewritten to a Chicano context."<sup>43</sup> Interesting though it may be, however, Tafoya's analysis fails because *Born in East L.A.* is not centrally about Rudy leading his people to the promised land—it is about his own desire to return home, and virtually all of the narrative is built around that quest. While there is a Moses-like flavor to the resolution of Rudy's drive, that only enters into the story briefly toward the end. The core story here is rather that of the *Odyssey*, one of the oldest recorded stories in the Western tradition. As Fregoso notes, Rudy's removal to Mexico "motivates the primary desire of the film's subject: Rudy's quest to return to East L.A. from Mexico (Tijuana). The task of the plot thus becomes the demonstration of the protagonist's ability to resolve those conflicts necessary for the final narrative equilibrium or closure."<sup>44</sup> Chon Noriega has also pointed out the parallel to that other modern *Odyssey* story: "Like the deracinated character of another musical fantasy (Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz*), Rudy pleads on several occasions, 'I just want to go home now, okay!'"<sup>45</sup>

Now while both Fregoso and Noriega recognize the core element of the story, they do not sufficiently explore its implications. One of the keys to understanding the *Odyssey* story is that while "home" provides the objective, the telling is primarily concerned with the protagonist's adventures along the way. *Odyssey* stories are thus adventure stories, and an additional element in many of them has to do with the changes that take place in the protagonist as a result of those adventures. The journey and its adventures then become the vehicles for the protagonist's character arc. In the case of Dorothy, this point

has been elaborated in Salman Rushdie's brilliant exposition of the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*:<sup>46</sup>

All three, Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion, are in Eliot's phrase, hollow men . . . Perhaps it is because they are all hollow that our imaginations can enter them and fill them up so easily. . . . Gradually, however, we discover that, along with their 'straight man', Dorothy . . . they embody one of the film's messages—that we already possess what we seek most fervently.

Noriega in particular seems to have a real blind spot concerning the importance of Rudy's character arc. At one point he states "As a picaresque hero, Rudy experiences a number of unrelated adventures without an essential transformation of character."<sup>47</sup> And again, "As a *picaro* (rascal, rogue), Rudy does not change as much as his circumstances change around him."<sup>48</sup> On the contrary, Rudy undergoes two fundamental transformations. One is the change from a purely individualistic orientation to a collective consciousness. Whereas Rudy's dilemma had resisted all of his individualistic efforts, it immediately yields to the collective, clearly indicating the writer's moral position.

The second profound transformation in Rudy's character is a result of the film's major subplot, Rudy's romantic relationship with Dolores. This particular subplot has its own distinct story paradigm, that of Beauty and the Beast. As noted earlier, this core story has to do with the necessity for a "beastly" character, almost always the male, to change before he can be united with his desired mate. In *Born in East L.A.*, the base line for Rudy's character arc is provided early in the film, when he is seen ogling and then making suggestive comments to a sexy French woman who somehow has made her way to the barrio. By the end of the film, Rudy's character has moved from lust to love, the transformation being effected in classic fashion by the film's "Beauty," Dolores.

Marin's narrative strategy, then, was to combine two standard story paradigms, each acting as a vehicle for a particular character transformation of the protagonist. However, even a well chosen narrative will not "work" for an audience if the audience does not care what happens to the protagonist. Screenwriters typically give a great deal of thought to ways of making a protagonist sympathetic in stories where the audience is invited to identify with that protagonist. Here, there are at least four factors that help to make Rudy sympathetic: 1) he has been wronged, 2) he is funny and self-deprecating, 3) he is

creative, as expressed through his music and his ability to come up with ploys to achieve his ends, and 4) he becomes more and more empathetic as the film progresses and his character changes.

That this film successfully crossed over to a mainstream audience speaks to the effectiveness of Cheech Marin's narrative strategies. Ordinarily we would not expect that given the recent political climate in the United States one could get a mainstream audience to root for someone leading a mass invasion across the U.S.-Mexico border, and yet that appears to be what happened. As Rosa Linda Fregoso notes, "*Born in East L.A.* teaches us that the cultural struggle must also be fought and won on the commercial screen."<sup>49</sup>

### *Conclusion*

My argument has been that most academic film analysis is partial and unbalanced, in that it divorces ideological analysis from the dramatic and mythic dimensions of feature film stories. Most academic critics seem out of touch with the concerns of working filmmakers, and particularly with how such filmmakers conceive of narrative structure.

In addition, a great deal of academic writing on film fails to sufficiently account for practical considerations in the art of feature filmmaking. When one reads books and articles written by the filmmakers themselves, one gets a very different "take" on the nature of features and on how and why creative decisions are made as they are. A quote from a recent book by director Sidney Lumet illustrates the point:<sup>50</sup>

I once asked Akira Kurosawa why he had chosen to frame a shot in *Ran* in a particular way. His answer was that if he'd panned the camera one inch to the left, the Sony factory would be sitting there exposed, and if he'd panned an inch to the right, we would see the airport—neither of which belonged in a period movie. Only the person who's made the movie knows what goes into the decisions that result in any piece of work. They can be anything from budget requirements to divine inspiration.

On the Latino side, Robert Rodriguez's book about the making of *El Mariachi* gives us a host of insights into some of the practical considerations that went into that film:<sup>51</sup>

As we were driving to one of the locations, we passed a really cool place. It was a buildingless door. It looked as if the whole building had been knocked down but the metal door and its door frame remained in perfect working

condition. Carlos said he had seen it a while back and wanted to show it to me. I told him we can't pass up the chance of using freaky locations free of charge like this. We got out and I chose to use it for yet another shot of the dream sequence. When in doubt have dream sequences!.... For the dream scene I had the kid bounce the basketball that I think later will turn into a human head. We have this foam rubber human head and we might as well use it somewhere.

We can only suppose what constructions might have been placed on this dream sequence by the academic imagination if Rodriguez had not preempted them with his down-to-earth explanation.

The Rodriguez quote also serves to point to another imbalance in a great deal of academic film analysis, and that is the inordinate amount of attention given to symbolic analysis. Not only is much of this analysis on shaky ground in the absence of direct knowledge of what was in the filmmaker's mind, but most of it is so convoluted that it has no bearing on what a general audience will perceive on viewing the film. Whereas readers of literary novels may be attuned to the use of subtle symbolism, feature film audiences will be far more affected by characterization and story development. Again, this does not mean that filmmakers do not consciously make use of symbolism. Many do, but my point here is that this is not what makes the film "work," because it is not what creates the audience response. To place the weight of an analysis on symbolic explication leads us into areas of minor importance in understanding the impact of a film.

Finally, I would like to address the frequently encountered calls for Latino films to offer a more in-depth analysis of social issues, and to be used as a sort of cultural "weapon" against a social system generally perceived to be oppressive and exploitative of Chicanos. My feeling is that narrative films are a blunt weapon when used for this purpose. If they are too explicitly political and ideological, they will turn people off as preachy or didactic. A self-consciously political film that does not reach an audience is a self-contradiction. The more sophisticated filmmakers will sometimes put their social messages in as subtexts, but in so doing one walks a fine line. If the messages are coded too subtly, they will be communicated only to the already-convinced. If the statement is too broad or general, it will have little specific political impact. Generally speaking, documentary films and books are both better suited as forms of media to these types of purposes. This is not to say that the attempt to make films that work at multiple levels should not be made. Indeed, I feel that both *El Norte*



and *Born in East L.A.* serve as sophisticated examples of what can be done along these lines. The point here is that our expectations as to what can be accomplished politically through feature films needs to be more limited and more realistic.

The corollary to this argument returns to the belief that feature films “work” best at the mythic and emotional levels. As such, their primary function at the moral level is to reinforce worthwhile but uncontroversial values such as love, compassion, empathy, and courage. As they have in the past, the best Latino features will continue to move us emotionally, and to remind us of those basic human values which we all acknowledge, but so frequently fail to live up to in our day-to-day lives.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of this theme, see Jon Boorstin's *Making Movies Work* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> For an introduction to Campbell's work, see his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), and *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
- <sup>4</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (October-December, 1955), and *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966).
- <sup>5</sup> Myth is the story form traditionally used by societies to express their most profound moral “truths.” Less weighty teachings are generally carried in the form of fairy tales, fables, or “tall tales,” with their simpler moral messages and flatter, less developed characters. Following this distinction, more “serious” films can be said to follow the mythic tradition, while less serious, “escapist” films are similar to these other, less complex story forms. A “serious” film can, of course, as easily take on a comedic as a tragic tone.
- <sup>6</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers & Screenwriters* (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992).
- <sup>7</sup> Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-75.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- <sup>9</sup> The fact that Natalie Wood was cast in the role of Maria is particularly ironic given the film's anti-prejudice stance.
- <sup>10</sup> Whit Stillman, *Barcelona/Metropolitan: Tales of Two Cities* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 91.
- <sup>11</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 20.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- <sup>15</sup> Ken Kelley, "Luis Valdez: The Interview," *San Francisco Focus* (September, 1987), pp. 104-105.
- <sup>16</sup> David Savran, "Border Tactics: Luis Valdez Distills the Chicano Experiences on Stage and Film," *American Theatre* (January 1988), p. 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Victor Valle, "A Chicano Reporter in 'Hispanic Hollywood': Editorial Agendas and the Culture of Professional Journalism," in Chon Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 262-263.
- <sup>18</sup> Danny Valdez played a major role in formulating the project that resulted in the film. (Ken Kelly, *op. cit.*, p. 103) In the Kelly interview, Luis Valdez also acknowledges experiencing sibling conflict with another brother. (*Ibid.*, p. 93)
- <sup>19</sup> In "The Cultural Schizophrenia of Luis Valdez," *Vogue* (March 15, 1969), p. 143.
- <sup>20</sup> Luis Valdez, *La Bamba: The Ritchie Valens Story* (Screenplay dated September 30, 1985). The script was originally entitled *Let's Go!*
- <sup>21</sup> Victor Fuentes, "Chicano Cinema: A Dialectic between Voices and Images of the Autonomous Discourse Versus Those of the Dominant," in Chon Noriega, *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- <sup>22</sup> Ken Kelley, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- <sup>23</sup> In my book *Beyond Aztlán* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988), I make an argument contrary to Valdez's optimistic projections. See especially chapter 6.
- <sup>24</sup> Beverly Mendheim, *Ritchie Valens: The First Latino Rocker* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1987), p. 139.
- <sup>25</sup> "Connecting with the American Experience: An Interview with Luis Valdez," *Hispanic Business* (July, 1987), p. 13.
- <sup>26</sup> David Savran, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- <sup>27</sup> Rafael Perez-Torres, "Chicanos in Film: A New Portrayal?," *Estos Tiempos* (Fall, 1988), p. 28.
- <sup>28</sup> José Antonio Burciaga, "A Conversation with Luis Valdez," *Imagine* (Winter, 1985), p. 133.
- <sup>29</sup> Victor Valle, *op. cit.*, p. 262.
- <sup>30</sup> For a discussion of these concepts, see Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis, eds., *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128-138.
- <sup>31</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>32</sup> Victor Fuentes, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-215.
- <sup>33</sup> Christine List, "Ideology and Immigration," *Jump Cut* No. 34 (March, 1989), p. 30.
- <sup>34</sup> David Rosen, *Off-Hollywood: The Making & Marketing of Independent Films* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 66.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with Gregory Nava by the author, September 29, 1990.

- <sup>37</sup> Character arc is the way in which a character changes during the course of the story.
- <sup>38</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56 and 62-63.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>41</sup> Chon Noriega, "‘Waas Sappening?’: Narrative Structure and Iconography in Born in East L.A.," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 14 (1995), pp. 107-128.
- <sup>42</sup> Eddie Tafoya, "Born in East L.A.: Cheech as the Chicano Moses," *Journal of Popular Culture*, (Spring, 1993), pp. 123-29.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.
- <sup>44</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- <sup>45</sup> Chon Noriega, "‘Waas Sappening?’ . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>46</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), pp. 48-49.
- <sup>47</sup> Chon Noriega, "‘Waas Sappening?’ . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>49</sup> Rosa Linda Fregoso, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- <sup>50</sup> Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. ix.
- <sup>51</sup> Robert Rodriguez, *Rebel Without a Crew* (New York: Dutton, 1995), p. 46.