

La Frontera- The U.S. Border Reflected in the Cinematic Lens

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Introduction

The U.S.-Mexico border/*la frontera* has the distinction of being the only place in the world where a highly developed country and a developing one meet and interact.² This is an area of historical conflict, convergence, conflict, dependency, and interdependency, all types of transboundary links, as well as a society of astounding complexity and an evolving and extraordinarily rich culture. Distinct border styles of music, literature, art, media, and certainly visual practices have flourished in the region. Several of the most important cultural and artistic-oriented institutions, such as universities, research institutes, community centers, and museums are found in the border states of both countries.

Beginning in the late 19th century and all the way to the present certain journalists, writers and visual artists have presented a distorted vision of the U.S. - Mexican border. The borderlands have been portrayed mostly as a lawless, rugged, and perilous area populated by settlers who sought a new life in the last frontier, but also criminals and crime fighters whose deeds became legendary. As Gordon W. Allport stated:

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² Paul Ganster and Alan Sweedler. *The United States-Mexico Border Region: Implications for U.S. Security*. Claremont CA: The Keck Center for International Strategic Studies, 1988.

[Stereotypes] aid people in simplifying their categories; they justify hostility; sometimes they serve as projection screens for our personal conflict. But there is an additional, and exceedingly important reason for their existence. They are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in by our media mass communication --by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movie, stage, radio, and television.³

Cinema has played an influential role on the dissemination of images and narratives of the U.S.-Mexican border.⁴ As it is widely acknowledged that, this powerful medium is more than an art or entertainment. In the contemporary world, films are important manifestations of popular culture.⁵ In fact, there exist no greater cultural manifestations and widely held perceptions of the borderlands than film productions.

It is the main purpose of this essay to compare and contrast three distinct cinematic representations of the border: the U.S., Mexico, and Chicano cinemas by reviewing selected films and documentaries (from the 1920s to the present).

The U.S. Border Cinema

In terms of the American border productions, it is important to note that they are divided into two distinct artistic practices: Hollywood films--produced by major studios and substantial resources-- and independent movies--conceived and produced outside the confines of the major studios or the industry. The border as a setting, or as a major theme of films, comprises hundreds of movies from the silent era at the beginning of the 20th century, all the way to contemporary times. In border cinema, there exist drama, comedy, westerns, and social protest films. In most

³ Gordon W. Allport. *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley Reading, 1954), 200.

⁴ James M. Linton. *Movies as Mass Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publishing, 1980)

⁵ B. Rosenberg and D.M. White (eds.) *Mass Culture. The Popular Arts in America* (New York, Free Press, 1975).

narratives, immigration and crime are the key features of the borderlands landscape. In many commercial films, the Anglo characters --including the border patrol agents--ended up cleaning up the border from criminals, saving the powerless immigrants. Meanwhile, the independent films include more complex and realistic characters and stories.

Hollywood Cinema

One of the first important border films is *Bordertown*, a 1935 Warner Brothers production with the acclaimed stars Paul Muni and Betty Davis in the title roles. An innovation in the movie is that the protagonist, Johnny Ramirez, is not a *greaser* or gangster, but a law student who wants to help his community. Yet, in its narrative, the film states that “like all Mexicans he [Johnny] has a violent character.” Ultimately, he is falsely accused of murder, and opted to return to his community and become an activist. It is clear that the film confirms that the melting pot is not for him.⁶

Borderline (1980) is another major Hollywood movie that addresses the topic of Mexican immigration. The film stars action icon Charles Bronson. He plays a compassionate and honest official, a division chief of a Border Patrol sector. The plot is an update of the typical hero of most westerns, who is in search of the killer of a colleague and close friend. *Borderline* introduces various stereotyped characters: the smuggling ring and courageous border agents. At the end, after a dramatic gunfight, the protagonist eliminates the villains in order to protect the defenseless immigrants.

The Border (1982), directed by Tony Richardson and starring Oscar winner Jack Nicholson, has a similar plot. A border patrol agent (Nicholson) is a conflictive man at odds with the values and

⁶ Charles Ramirez Berg. “Bordertown, the Assimilation Narrative and the Chicano Problem Film.” In Chon Noriega (ed.). *Chicano and Film*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992.

corruption of the system; he has to make a choice between good and evil, accommodation and resistance. Despite fine performances and solid directing, the film is highly stereotypical, and quite superficial in its treatment of border issues. The villains--and certain border agents-- are violent, corrupt, and greedy. The women characters in the film are self-centered, interested solely in immediate gratification. Once again, the protagonist, after violent confrontation with the corrupt Border Patrol agents, becomes the savior of the undocumented workers-- viewed as helpless pawns in the story.

Extreme Prejudice (1987). In this border western, the narrative depicts an Anglo hero against corrupt and savage villains, involved in organized crime. This is a formula initiated with the *greaser* films at the turn of the 20th century. The film depicts Nick Nolte as an honorable Texas Ranger pitted against the principal criminal and drug leader of the region --his former best friend. The setting of the narrative occurs in the South Texas-Mexican border. As expected, the hero triumphs at the end, defeating the crime ring and making the border safe and prosperous once again.

Losing It (1983) is a deplorable border comedy. The plot follows four young Anglo teenagers who head to Tijuana for serious fun and excitement. With the exception of one of the protagonists (played by Tom Cruise), the other three are the worst type of the ugly Americans abroad. The film encompasses every conceivable negative stereotype about a Mexican border town and its citizens.⁷

Viva Max (1969) is a film that portrays a Mexican general, played by Peter Ustinov. In order to regain the respect of his men, the protagonist decides to invade the United States from Mexico to

⁷ David R. Maciel. *El bandolero, el pocho y la raza. Imágenes Cinematográficas del Chicano*. México, CONACULTA / Siglo XXI Editores, 2000.

reclaim the Alamo. The slap-stick episodes of the taking of El Alamo are more dumb than humorous. It could be argued that this is a satire of Texas mythology. However, Mexicans in *Viva Max* do not escape the usual demeaning portrayal found in Hollywood movies. In other words, the satire here is done at the expense of the Mexican-origin population and their traditions.

Independent Cinema

An American impressive independent film is *Lone Star* (1996) written and directed by John Sayles. The film centers upon an interesting constellation of complex characters that reside in the Texas-Mexico border, including sheriffs, business people, and citizens of both sides of the border. This drama captures various aspects of social conflict, but also addresses the corrupt side of local politics. What is outstanding is the complexity and uniqueness of the depiction of the border society and traditions.

Another outstanding independent film is *Frontera* (2014), directed by Michael Berry. The film stars Eva Longoria, Michael Peña, Ed Harris, and Amy Madigan. The characters of this film gravitate in an unnamed border town in Arizona. This drama deals with tragic issues related to undocumented immigration. The film highlights the actions of the Minutemen, vigilantes who do not hesitate in murdering Mexican immigrants as they attempt to cross the border searching for work. The protagonist, Miguel Ramirez, is one such individual who entered the U.S. in search for a better life; he ended up being falsely accused of the death of Olivia McNary (who in actuality died in an accident). Roy McNary--a former sheriff and Olivia's husband-- investigates the case. He undergoes a change of heart and presents evidence of the innocence of Miguel. At the end, he even carries a citizen's arrest of one of the murderous vigilantes.

In terms of documentary cinema, the film *Chulas Fronteras* (1976) by Les Blank deserves attention and much praise. This is a rare accurate cinematic description of popular culture practices, especially the music of the U.S.-Mexico border. This documentary depicts interviews with leading musicians and integrates their music.

Mexico's Border Cinema

Among the Spanish-speaking countries, Mexico has the leading cinematic traditions in terms of quality and quantity. Mexican cinema has a historical tradition that spans the entire 20th century. *La frontera* has been an important and recurring theme in its narrative films, starting in the 1920s in the highpoint of Mexican immigration to the United States. The initial Mexican feature on a border theme was a most interesting and illuminating film entitled: *El hombre sin patria* (1922). It was followed by other early movies, such as: *La China Hilaria* (1938), *Adios mi chaparrita* (1939), *Primero soy mexicano* (1950), *Soy mexicano de acá de este lado* (1951), and many others.⁸

From the 1960s on, the great majority of Mexican border cinema has been produced for merely commercial purposes. With few exceptions, the plots are usually repetitive and displayed a marked disregard for authenticity or realistic portrayal of the border conditions.⁹ The violence in these films is graphic and constant. At times the criminals who deal with drugs are the Border Patrol agents or the mafias.¹⁰ As the distinguished essayist, Carlos Monsiváis, states: “During an era that looks endless, Mexican producers concentrated in the exploitation of the border market,

⁸ David R. Maciel. “Los desarraigados: los chicanos vistos por el cine mexicano.” In Ignacio Durán et al. *México-Estados Unidos. Encuentros y Desencuentros en el cine. México: Filmoteca-UNAM/IMCINE/CISAN-UNAM. 1996. pp. 165-189.*

⁹ David R. Maciel. “Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Contemporary Cinema.” Paper presented for Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series, University of Arizona. February 13, 1987.

¹⁰ Norma Iglesias, *La visión de la frontera a través del cine mexicano*. Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1985).

with films whose artistic quality is depicted in their titles: *Quién teme a la Migra*, *Mojado pero caliente*, *El Taco Loco está aquí*, *Chicano Karateca*, *Dos Chichimecas en Hollywood* and so on until the Great Flood [...]"¹¹

However certain films merit further commentary, including those of the marvelous Mexican comedian, German Valdés "Tin Tan," who has been labeled in Mexico as the classic *Pachuco*.¹² His uniqueness on the screen has been concentrated on his usage of the mixture of English and Spanish, and certainly on "his attire--broad-brimmed hat, drape pants that ballooned out at the knee and were closely tapered at the ankle, oversize jacket, and on occasion a gold or silver watch chain hanging from the pocket."¹³

No other major actor in Mexican cinema captured with a great deal of creativity, the societal traits and the richness of the culture of the U.S.-Mexico border of the 1940s. One such unique trait by Tin Tan was depicting the *Pachucos* or *Zoot suiters*. They were a social movement, a distinct form of youth identity, and a unique cultural practice.¹⁴ This distinguished comedian traveled throughout the border from Laredo to Tijuana, embellishing border culture and society. Tin Tan exposed and popularized *Pachuquismo* in its true-self since his early sketches, performances and in various films--starting with *El hijo desobediente* (1945). He was in fact the first major crossover icon figure of Mexico. In the words of Carlos Monsiváis, he was the first postmodern artist capable of bridging Mexican and Chicano popular culture practices.¹⁵

¹¹ Maciel, *El bandolero*. op.cit.14-15 pp.

¹² Susan Marie Green. "Zoot Suiters Past and Present." Ph.D. Diss. University of Minnesota, 1997.

¹³ David R. Maciel "Tin Tan. Mexico's Postmodern Icon." *Voices of Mexico* [UNAM]. no. 101. Summer 2016.

¹⁴ Álvarez, Luis. *The Power of the Zoot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

¹⁵ Carlos Monsiváis. "The Culture of the Frontier. The Mexican Side." In Stanley R. Ross (ed.). *Views across the Border*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978. pp. 63-64.

Espaldas Mojadas is a 1955 impressive border film, directed by Alejandro Galindo --a well-respected Golden Age director. The film opens with a panoramic view of Ciudad Juárez while the narrator informs the audience that: “on this side of the Río Bravo it is still Mexico, where Spanish is spoken and songs are sung to the Virgin of Guadalupe. On the other side of the Rio Grande as the gringos call it, are skyscrapers and it’s where everyone owns a car.”¹⁶

The story initiates when the protagonist, Rafael, travels from San Luis Potosi to the Mexican border, hoping to cross into the United States. He meets Frank Mendoza, a *coyote*, who works for Mr. Sterling and specializes in smuggling undocumented workers (*espaldas mojudas*) across the border. Rafael crosses the river and gets a job in El Paso, Texas. Subsequently, he has a fight with Sterling because of his unethical treatment of workers like him. His conflicts with Sterling continue during the film. In his adventures, Rafael is aided by Maria del Consuelo, a Mexican American waitress. At the end of the film, Rafael and Maria del Consuelo reunite in Ciudad Juárez. They take their destiny in their own hands, deciding to settle in the interior of Mexico--realizing that the American dream is not for them.

Espaldas mojudas is by far the best production of Mexican cinema in regard to immigration; the acting, directing and plot are all exceptional. The movie’s powerful impact is due to the hard-hitting look at Mexico’s socio-economic problems. This includes the sense of hopelessness for some sectors of its population, which drives them to leave their homeland. The feature also highlights the essential role of Mexican workers in the U.S. economy.¹⁷

¹⁶ David Maciel and María García-Acevedo. “The Celluloid Immigrant. The Narrative Films of Mexican Immigration.” In David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobeck (eds.), *Culture Across Borders*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998. p. 159.

¹⁷ Maciel and García-Acevedo, op. cit.

Santo en la frontera del Terror (1969) is an adventure movie, starring the iconic wrestler, El Santo. The plot concerns undocumented workers, who are being assassinated by a ruthless doctor and his gang for the purpose of selling their organs to international buyers for high profits. After many fights with the doctor's accomplices, El Santo predictably defeats the villains, and thus makes the border safe once again for immigrants.

Raíces de Sangre (1976) is an outstanding and unique film of the cinema of Mexico since it was directed by a Chicano director, Jesús Salvador Treviño. In an era, when the Mexican government was cultivating ties with leaders and key participants of the Chicano Movement, director Treviño received an invitation from the state-owned film producing company, CONACINE, to write, cast and direct the movie. The film was pioneering in the sense that it was the first time that Chicano and Mexican actors worked side by side on such a large-scale film effort. Regarding his experience, Treviño expressed: "I had to go to Mexico, although I am an American citizen to direct my first feature. I found more sympathetic ears than there."¹⁸

The movie was filmed entirely in the Calexico-Mexicali area. It deals with labor, immigration and interethnic conflict along the U.S.-Mexican border. *Raíces de Sangre* depicts the challenges of the Chicano and Mexican workers, including discrimination, attacks by the police, and their labor strikes against exploitive multinational companies.¹⁹

Mojado Power (1981) was a border film produced, written, directed and starred by Alfonso Arau. This light-hearted film attempted to incorporate comedy with a political message. The story centers on an undocumented worker, who after various escapades in the U.S. side of the

¹⁸ Interview with Jesús Salvador Treviño, Los Angeles, CA. July 12, 1985.

¹⁹ Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Raíces de Sangre, First Feature Film directed by a Chicano." *Somos* [Mexico City] June-July 1978.

border, devises a plan to unify Mexican and Chicanos workers in a substantial political force. The emblem of his movement is “Mojado Power.” The theme and the message of the movie are certainly valid and important; however, the story and characters of the film are not. The film makes a farce of the complex plight of the undocumented workers in the United States.

Lola la Trailera (1985) deals with drugs, crime, and contraband pitted against the protagonist nicknamed Lola la Trailera because of her profession as a trucker. The plot narrates the struggle of Lola and other honest truckers against a ruthless drug trafficking mafia. After endless action and violence sequences, the heroine and her partner almost single handedly defeat the villains. The success of the film in the box-office is the novelty of having the protagonist, portrayed by Rosa Gloria Chagoyán, as a resourceful vigilante character on wheels that ultimately outwits and outfights the male criminals.²⁰

El Jardín del Edén (1994), a movie directed by Maria Novaro, takes place in Tijuana. **It** portrays the social, cultural, and identity tensions that exist in the border, through the eyes and lives of three young women: Jane, Elizabeth “Liz,” and Serena. All of them are in search of their own paradise while confronting their own challenges. Jane is an Anglo-American that discovers Mexico while searching for her brother. Liz is a Chicana who wants to recover her lost cultural heritage, and also make sure that her daughter becomes a bicultural person. Serena is a Mexican widow that moves to the border, in search of ways to make a better living for her family. The movie --that include solid performances--ends with unresolved issues. The last scene is a reminder of the tension between the First and the Third World--a group of Mexican workers who wait by the fence for their chance to cross to the United States.

²⁰ Interview with Tomás Perez Turrent, Mexico City, July 11, 1988.

El Traspatio (Backyard, 2009) is an excellent and courageous film that centers on a horrendous event: the assassination of hundreds of young women in the border city of Ciudad Juárez; many of them were workers of *maquiladoras*. The renowned Mexican writer, Sabina Bergman, undertook the challenge to explore the root causes of the mass killings. In search for answers, she portrays the passivity of the state authorities and the owners of the *maquiladoras* --multinational companies-- regarding the violent crimes. Also, she addresses in her screenplay the societal reaction, including the activism of community organizations that advocate the rights of women. All of these trends are seen through the eyes of the protagonist, Blanca Bravo (masterfully interpreted by Ana de la Reguera), a recently graduated police officer from Mexico City who is sent to investigate, and attempt to resolve the situation.

Director Carlos Carrera captures in *El Traspatio*, the binational landscape of the “sister cities” and certainly the contrasts between the First and the Third World. Important is the fact that the film dissects the dark side of globalization and transboundary issues--including *maquiladoras* and crime. The movie was shot in both Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Its main characters spoke in their native languages: Spanish, English, and Tzotzil that gives them more authenticity. *El Traspatio* is a film highly recommended for those viewers wanting to explore the intricacies (the dark side) of border issues.

Chicano Border Cinema

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicano community actively participated in a heroic struggle for civil rights, known as the Chicano Movement (or *La Causa*). This social conflict was framed in the context of intense mobilizations from different sectors of American society (African-Americans, women, indigenous peoples, and young people) that demanded justice and

equity. Among its many achievements and legacy, *La Causa* fostered a cultural flourishing that included all artistic genres: letters, art, theater, music, and certainly cinematography.

Thus, numerous Chicano feature films and documentaries are not only outstanding works of art but also reflect a deep sensitivity toward the border experience. Referring to Chicano cinematography, Carlos Monsiváis states: “its themes go from the heroic to the daily struggles.”²¹

The principal goal of these films is to portray border themes in cinema through the eyes and actions of the participants themselves, and thus break the distorted images and stereotypes of the border. These filmmakers certainly offer an alternative cinematic language, style, and ideology.

Feature Films

Alambrista (1979) directed by Robert Young is a landmark film that narrates the odyssey of Roberto, a Mexican undocumented worker. Unlike other films, it opens with the push factors that prompt the protagonist to leave his problematic life in his town in Mexico, highlighting that his only option are the agricultural fields of California. During Roberto’s misadventures, he realizes the constant exploitive conditions and the profound sense of isolation experienced by undocumented workers in the United States.²²

The emphasis of the film is in character study. This movie is one of the rare films in which artistic quality and social commentary are superbly linked. The dialogues are in both English and Spanish, which lends great authenticity; the docudrama format has seldom been better employed in a feature film. This movie never resorts to simplistic narration, unrealistic heroes, or overdone dogma.²³

²¹ Maciel, “El bandolero,” op.cit.

²² Interview with Robert Young, Los Angeles, CA, 12 de junio de 1986.

²³ “The Screen: *Alambrista*.” *The New York Times*, June, 3 1981.

The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez (1982), directed by Robert Young and co-produced by Moctesuma Esparza, illustrates with great artistic endeavor an important historical incident. This film narrates a tragic episode in the life of Gregorio Cortez, who became a folk hero and a symbol of resistance in South Texas at the turn of the 20th century.²⁴ After a sheriff kills Gregorio's brother, attempting to arrest him without any proof of wrongdoing, Cortez fires, killing the sheriff in self-defense. He, then, having no other option, fled and was chased unsuccessfully throughout the state by the Texas Rangers. His hair-raising escapes, against the entire force of the Rangers, earned him the admiration of his people. Ultimately, he gave up when his wife and children were incarcerated to put pressure on him to surrender. Cortez was tried and convicted, staying in prison for 16 years (and finally paroled). Totally devoid of stereotypes or good/evil dichotomy, the characters bring out the points of views, class interests, prejudices, and contradictions of two border societies in conflict. Noteworthy is the excellent performance of James Edward Olmos as Gregorio Cortez.

Director and screenwriter, Gregory Nava, debuted with *El Norte* (1983). This is a pioneer film that depicts the complex and often tragic drama of Central American immigrants to the United States that left their homeland because of the violence. According to director Nava, his intention was to narrate a story about "the conflict between the First and Third Worlds that occurs along the U.S.-Mexico border."²⁵ At that time the movie was produced, Central American immigration was not addressed by the media or policy-makers. The film has been acclaimed for its creative screenplay, photography, inspiring musical score, and outstanding performances--particularly by the protagonists: Zaide Silvia Gutierrez and David Villalpando who debuted in this film. The

²⁴ Americo Paredes wrote *With a Pistol in my Hand* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), a definitive study of Gregorio Cortez, his life, the epoch, and the famous border ballad.

²⁵ Interview with Gregory Nava, Chula Vista, CA, August 12, 1991.

dialogue is maintained in Maya and Spanish, adding realism to the story. Over the years, *El Norte* has become a cult film. It had significant economic success, received high praise,²⁶ and was included in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress --that showcases the range and diversity of American film heritage.²⁷

In a totally different vein, *Born in East L.A.* (1987) is an exceptional film that employs comedy to highlight social satire.²⁸ Its director, screenwriter, and star, Cheech Marin, takes direct aim at various U.S. and Mexican institutions and stereotypes of the border. The plot centers on Rudy Robles --portrayed by Marin-- a third generation Chicano who gets caught in an immigration raid. He is deported to Tijuana because he “looked Mexican” and was unable to prove his U.S. citizenship on the spot to border agents. Rudy, who cannot speak Spanish, finds himself experiencing the tribulations (but also the solidarity) that Mexican immigrants face in a foreign country. *Born in East L.A.* uses humor to criticize various institutions in charge of the “control of the borders.” After numerous comedic situations, the film closes with hundreds of undocumented immigrants led by the protagonist overrunning the Border Patrol, and crossing into the U.S. with the song *Coming to America* by Bruce Springsteen as background music. *Born in East L.A.* has enjoyed critical acclaim and respectable box-office success in the Americas.²⁹

Break of Dawn (1988), written and directed by Isaac Aronstein, masterfully traces key events in the life of Pedro J. González, the first Spanish-language radio celebrity in the U.S. At an early age, González joined the forces of Francisco Villa during the Mexican Revolution. After the

²⁶ Vincent Canby, “El Norte: A Fine Movie Fueled by Injustice.” *The New York Times*, January 22, 1984.

²⁷ See, National Registry. <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/> Retrieved from, May 6, 2021.

²⁸ Juan Rodríguez Flores, “Cheech Marin, humor con preocupación social.” *Proceso* [Mexico City] 19 September 1987.

²⁹ Chon Noriega, “Cafe Órale: Narrative Structure in Born in East L.A.” *Tonantzin* [San Antonio, Texas], February 1991.

defeat of Villa, and the reprisals against his followers, he fled to the U.S. with his wife fearing for his life. In Los Angeles, he initially found employment in a radio station, advertising products in Spanish. By the late 1920s, his radio show, “Los Madrugadores” was heard throughout the Southwest. González, also became a distinguished community activist on behalf of the rights of the Mexican origin population in the era of the Great Depression. Being defiant against the local power elite, he ultimately fell victim to injustice, incarcerated on false charges, and condemned to prison after a farce of a trial. As a response to the absolute disregard of justice, his wife Maria mobilized community groups, gathering strong support and resources for Pedro’s cause until he was finally released six years later. The film has been a recipient of well-deserved praise. Two renowned Mexican artists were the protagonists of *Break of Dawn*: María Rojo and Óscar Chávez. The production was mainly shot in the San Diego-Tijuana border.³⁰

El Mariachi (1992) by Robert Rodriguez is certainly one of the most remarkable debuts by a Chicano director. The film is a border action story of a lone mariachi, falsely mistaken for an infamous hitman, since both dressed in black and carried a guitar case. It is ultimately a tale of one individual who manages to defy and defeat a dangerous mafia. The action scenes and the characters are fresh and authentic. This impressive film is entirely spoken in Spanish and set along the border (Ciudad Acuña Coahuila and Del Rio, Texas).

A notable aspect is that the movie was produced with a budget of 7,000 dollars. Director Rodriguez was the screenwriter, cinematographer, sound person, editor and sole producer. Talking about his film, Rodriguez stated that he shot every scene in one take: “I just fed the

³⁰ David R. Maciel. “Cine chicano: Entrevista con Isaac Artenstein,” *Dicine* [Mexico City], May 1989.

actors the line and moved on.”³¹ *El Mariachi* resonated with audiences on both sides of the border, and it gained first place in the Sundance Film Festival.

Director Gregory Nava addresses the topic of immigration through the odyssey of three generations of a Chicano family living in East Los Angeles in *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995). The film fully captures the roots of the Mexicans (*Californios*) in the 19th century. It then concentrates on the challenges that the family members faced throughout the 20th century: societal changes, intra-family conflicts, assimilation, and preservation of Mexicanness. One of the characters brings to the attention of the public the plight of Central American immigrants and the solidarity they can find in the Chicano community.

Another noteworthy film of Gregory Nava is *Selena* (1997), which narrates with great skill and sensitivity the life and career of the Texan singer of Mexican origin, Selena Quintanilla Pérez--including the many difficulties she had to overcome before becoming famous. Selena was murdered at the age of 24 when success had already catapulted her as the queen of Tex-Mex music. By her early age, she became, and still is, an icon of Chicano border music. Her artistry has had a great impact in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Among the many successes of the film *Selena*, are the excellent script, the masterful direction of Nava, and the outstanding performance of Jennifer Lopez, who depicts Selena Quintanilla-Perez in a skillful manner, as a working-class Chicana and also as a charismatic and talented artist.³²

The narrative of *Selena* is not strictly linear. An interesting scene concerns the issue of crossing the border when Selena and her father travel by car from Texas to Monterrey for an important

³¹ Terrence Rafferty, “Have Guitar Will Travel.” *The New Yorker*, February 22, 1993.

³² David Maciel and María García-Acevedo, “Selena diva inmortal y extraordinaria exponente de la latinidad.” en A. Ortega y S. Achondo (eds...). *Otra mirada. Mujeres en el séptimo arte*. México / Río Subterráneo / Humanidades, 2020.

presentation there. The father warns her that Mexicans can reject her because she is "different" [culturally] from them since she is not fluent in Spanish. But to the contrary, her talent charmed Mexican audiences. The film *Selena* was well received by the critics and the general public. According to the review of *Newsweek*, its great merit is: "encapsulating Selena's story for posterity."³³ In January 2021, the Hispanic Caucus recommended this memorable movie to be included in the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.³⁴

Documentary Films

The Chicano documentary film certainly stands out, and its development has continued in a remarkable fashion from the time of intense activism in the 1960s and 1970s to the very present.³⁵ Due to the diversity of its topics, it is more than evident that the documentary has been a primary source for the knowledge of the social, political, and cultural experience of the Chicano community. Altogether, Chicana and Chicano filmmakers have produced and exhibited more than a hundred documentaries³⁶ and this number increases each year. A number of them concern themes of the U.S.-Mexico border. By now there already exist three distinct generations of Chicana and Chicano filmmakers.

Frequently, documentary filmmakers have addressed important issues that have even eluded the attention of specialists, bringing forth critical images and narratives to their artistry. Their works have had a profound impact on addressing the invisibility of the Chicano/Latino community, and in rectifying the denigrating and negative stereotypes about them--common in many American

³³ Selena: The Life and Legacy of Tejano's Queen. *Newsweek*. Special Issue. October 19, 2018.

³⁴ See,

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/lawmakers-push-add-selena-national-film-registry-boost-latino-visibility-n1252659>. Retrieved from May 5, 2021.

³⁵ David Maciel, "Visions of Aztlan, Chicano Documentary Film." *Estudios Ingleses [Español]*, SPECIAL ISSUE. Contemporary Challenges in Chicanx Literature & Culture, 2020.

³⁶ Interview with Hector Galan. Los Angeles, CA. August 29, 2020.

print and visual expressions.³⁷ One main characteristic of Chicano filmmakers is that they often serve as writers, producers, as well as directors of their documentaries. Important is the fact that nowadays, over a third the documentaries are produced, written, or directed by Chicanas.

The documentaries cover a wide range of topics, including: the U.S.-Mexico border, Chicana/Chicano history (and its links to Mexican history); social and political struggles; gender issues; cultural practices; and immigration topics, among others. All the documentaries clearly reflected the double commitment of Chicano filmmakers: to contribute works of high artistic value and to transmit a political discourse associated with the ideology of Chicanismo.³⁸

The Unwanted (1975), which was directed and produced by José Luis Ruiz, represents a pioneer and exceptional portrayal of the importance of the Mexican immigrants in the U. S. economy and society. It denounces the exploitation of the undocumented workers and their treatment as criminals by the U.S. immigration agencies. In addition, *The Unwanted* presents a most illuminating historical account of the Mexican-origin community in the United States. This documentary won an Emmy Award.

The Hunt for Pancho Villa (1993), produced and written by Paul Espinosa, addressed masterfully an important chapter in the history of the U.S.-Mexico border: the Pershing Expedition that occurred in 1916 during the Mexican Revolution. It entailed a U.S. military incursion--that included more than fourteen thousand regular army troops--into Mexican territory in order to capture General Francisco Villa. In spite of the substantial U.S. army venture into the Mexican border states, General John Pershing and his troops never found, much less captured General Villa.

³⁷ Maciel, David R., "La Reconquista Cinematográfica. Panorama del cine documental chicano." *NEXOS* [Mexico City], November, 21, 2019. <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=45830> Retrieved from May 8, 2021.

³⁸ Maciel, op.cit.

Director Paul Espinoza filmed various documentaries about key issues of the border between the United States and Mexico. This was the case of *Uneasy Neighbors* (1989) that deals with the tensions between the migrant camps in rural San Diego and the surrounding community. In *The New Tijuana* (1990), Espinoza focuses on the history of the city, its economic challenges (*maquiladoras*), and the emergence of new political and civil society voices.

The prolific and creative filmmaker Philip Rodríguez directed an important documentary produced for PBS: *Mixed Feelings: San Diego/Tijuana* (2002). It contrasts the material conditions (urban imagery) of the area with the perceptions and attitudes of the people in both border cities.³⁹ At the end, the documentary exemplified the opportunities and challenges of the daily encounter between the First and the Third World along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The prolific filmmaker, Lourdes Portillo, directed a key documentary, *Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Woman* (2001). This is a shocking, groundbreaking film about the terrible tragedy of the ruthless femicides of more than three hundred women, committed in a Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city of Mexico at that time. This documentary collects insightful and moving testimonies, while exploring the root causes of such horrendous gender violence.⁴⁰

Director Cristina Ibarra develops various films related to the complexity of the transboundary links in the U.S.-Mexico border. In *Las Marthas* (2014), she addresses the story of a group of young Chicanas in Laredo, Texas who transform a celebration brought by the first Anglo-American settlers --George Washington's birthday-- into a binational cultural festivity in

³⁹ *Mixed Feelings: San Diego / Tijuana* (Dir. Philip Rodriguez 2002).

<https://www.philliprodriguez.co/#/mixed-feelings-san-diegotijuana/> Retrieved May 8, 2021.

⁴⁰ *Señorita Extraviada* (Dir. Lourdes Portillo, 2001). Retrieved from <https://www.lourdesportillo.com/senorita-extraviada> May 8, 2021.

“Los dos Laredos.” With great creativity, Ibarra ends up generating an insightful reflection on complex social and cultural interactions that occur at the border.^[33]

In 2019, director Ibarra (along with Alex Rivera) directed *The Infiltrators* (2019). The film recounts the experiences of two young *Dreamers* and their quest to stop deportations. In order to better denounce the problem, they narrate their own experiences in a private prison, while they were incarcerated. This documentary won the Next *Innovator Award* and the *Audience Award* at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival.

Currently, Cristina Ibarra is working on a documentary about El Paso--tentatively named *A Portrayal of a Border Town*. She plans to interview various individuals that can illustrate a complex context, which includes the recent mass shooting, the images of immigrant children in cages, and the current effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹

Another notable border documentary film is *Porvenir* (2019), directed by Andrew Shapter and produced by Héctor Galán. It examines a most tragic episode that occurred in 1918. The Texas Rangers murdered more than a dozen Mexican citizens without any cause and with total impunity in Porvenir, a small Texas town along the border. This incident was part of the hundreds of others that occurred --in similar fashion--against the population of Mexican-origin in the so-called “killing fields in Texas.”⁴²

A Final Note

⁴¹ See, Cristina Ibarra. *Films & Work in Progress* (2020). www.cristinaibarra.com/ Retrieved May 8, 2021.

⁴² See, historians William Carrigan and Clive Web. *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

The U.S.-Mexican border has continued to be a key cinematic theme. However, both the American and the Mexican cinemas have often dismissed many the opportunity to produce creative and even entertaining films on the borderlands. In fact, many Hollywood and Mexican films help to perpetuate a misperception of the borderlands through superficial and negative stereotyping of its residents.⁴³

Certain themes of border films have remained static since its initial appearance: crime, immigration, comedic situations, and to a much lesser degree, historical topics. Not only are the plots of border films repetitive, but what is equally revealing is the absence of sound screenplays.

Many Hollywood films still continue to reflect the contemporary U.S.-Mexican border as a version of the “the wild west”: a lawless, primitive and rugged last frontier where Chicanos/Mexicans --*greasers* and *bandidos* in the past-- are now the criminals and drug traffickers. In some cases, it is usually an Anglo man, the one that can bring some justice and restore peace in the borderlands. However, it needs to be acknowledged, though, that various U.S. independent films are exceptions and have had more interesting stories and complex characters.

In Mexico’s cinema, the overall situation is not better. The characters portrayed in most of its commercial films are simplistic and stereotyped. In many of the films, the portrayal of the border has not significantly changed overtime; the plots are repetitive. Yet, there have been efforts to reverse this trend. *Espaldas Mojadas* is a pioneer example. In the 1970s, *Raices de Sangre* proposes a transboundary perspective by including issues and characters from both sides of the border. In a similar trend, the contemporary film, *Traspatio/Backyard* addresses exploitation,

⁴³ According to Charles Ramirez-Berg, stereotypes are simplifications of reality. See, “Stereotyping in Films in General and in the Hispanics in Particular” in *The Howard Journal of Communications*, no. 3 vol. 2. Summer 1990.

violence, and femicides in Ciudad Juárez by examining their root causes in both sides of the border.

Chicano cinema has been the most successful in providing a more accurate vision of the border. Many of its feature and documentary films narrate critical past and present situations. In its origins one of the key motivations of the Chicano cinema was precisely to correct stereotypes and highlight stories and characters that had not been seen previously on the silver screen. Against all odds, Chicano filmmakers have directed seminal border feature films and documentaries. In this millennium the association of various Chicano directors with PBS has permitted them to receive funding and have a vital exhibition channel for their documentaries.

Perhaps in a not too distant future, *la frontera* --the U.S. Mexico border-- will present the treatment that it merits from the commercial cinemas of the United States and Mexico. In terms of Chicano cinema, it requires finding new avenues for funding and exhibition. There exist a great deal of stories, biographies, historical and contemporary aspects of the U.S.-Mexico border that deserved to be brought to the silver screen.