

El Norte Ideology and immigration

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 34, March, 1989, pp. 27-31

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Hollywood's images of Latinos consist mostly of abusive and negative stereotypes. [1][[open notes in new window](#)] The underlying social issues affecting Latino life in this country are seldom addressed. This lack of representation on the screen is mirrored in the employment patterns of the industry where Latinos make up only about 3% of the work force at major Hollywood studios while comprising more than 9% of the overall population (Ibid., p. 16). Clearly Latinos need access to production as well as representation in film images, for an adequate representation of Latinos to emerge.[2]

Gregory Nava is a young Chicano director who is not backed by a major Hollywood studio.[3] With co-writer and producer Anna Thomas, Nava has challenged the ethnocentric structure of the North American entertainment industry with his independently financed film *EL NORTE* (1983). This feature-length film deals with topics ignored by Hollywood. It focuses on two young Guatemalan Indians from their flight from their village in Guatemala's highlands to their life of hardship and isolation in Los Angeles, California. The film enjoyed a successful run in art circuit theaters, showed on both cable television's Art and Entertainment Network and PBS, and is available on video cassette. It is a rare example of commercially successful North American Chicano Cinema.[4] For this reason the film merits careful critical examination, especially in terms of its portrayal of Latino life.

Melodrama has always been a significant genre in Latin American cinema. Concerned with a play upon emotions often bordering on pathos, melodrama's protagonists usually suffer incredible adversity, frequently accompanied by the loss of, or rejection by, family and friends. The first sound film produced in Latin America, *SANTA* (Mexico, 1931), followed this format.[5] Today, melodrama is still perhaps the most popular genre for mass media narratives. Thus in the U.S., Spanish-speaking television networks show a large number of *telenovelas*

(produced mainly in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil). These *telenovelas* resemble English language daytime soap operas with the exception that they run for a limited number of episodes (usually 100 to 400). Though most of the *telenovelas* deal with contemporary social issues, some are set in past eras. Also, many of the stories have the topic of class-bred conflict embedded in them — normally in the form of a love story. *Telenovelas* are aired during both daytime and primetime. Their popularity extends to male as well as female viewers.

EL NORTE fits well within this melodramatic tradition. The central story deals with the young people's immigration. That story also allows concern to be expressed for the disruption of the nuclear family and, by extension, the loss of mutual aid and cultural identity within the pueblo (translated as both the people and the community). The underlying cause given for the destruction of these positively coded values is an overly simplified class-based explanation played out in the form of stereotyped villains.

Filmmakers and critics of the New Latin American cinema have often challenged the viability of using bourgeois melodramatic form to take on the revolutionary task of undermining regressive ideological assumptions.⁶ However, many Latin filmmakers still warmly embrace the genre, recognizing the value of its widespread appeal to a broad based audience. Even so, most left filmmakers working with melodrama have also included some sort of rewriting or deconstruction of the form. For instance, instead of a strict linear narrative, LUCÍA (Solas, 1968) uses three melodramas set in different historical periods, with three sets of historically-determined characters. Sergio Giral's THE OTHER FRANCISCO is the story of slavery and the abolitionist movement in Cuba; its form is that of an emotionally-charged melodrama intersected by Brechtian distancing devices, particularly "corrective" voice-over narration and interviews. By taking a popular narrative form and reworking it, the left cinema in Latin America has successfully combined pleasure with learning.

Should the preoccupations of Latin American left filmmakers also be those of Latino filmmakers in the United States? From what point of view can Latino cinema here be critiqued? In some sense, the mere fact that few Latinos have been able to make films reflecting their experience, indicates the need for caution when mounting any sort of ideological analysis and critique of their films. However, it is a central concern of the Chicano cinema movement that those images which are produced approach an accurate portrayal of the Latino experience and work towards revealing some of the contradictions within daily life that sustain the economic and cultural dominance that North Americans maintain over Latin America.

Futhermore, viewers often generalize from the film's point of view and see it as representing the whole ethnic consciousness of Latino cultural heritage. But Latin American culture within the United States is not homogenous. While Latinos share

some of the same cultural history as do Guatemalan refugees, the two groups' identities should not be blurred, especially at this point in time. Cultural misunderstandings can occur between Latinos of diverse nationalities. Contradictory racial, class and sexual orientations come into play. With this in mind, I will venture an analysis of EL NORTE, looking at Nava's treatment of the Guatemalan Indian in particular.

EL NORTE is a melodrama divided into three acts. The first, titled "Arturo Xuncax," is set in an Indian village in Guatemala. The adolescent protagonists of the sequence, Enrique and Rosa, are Arturo's son and daughter. Arturo is a proud Indian who organizes his fellow coffee pickers to fight the plantation's rich landowner. Enrique and Rosa are shown living within the bounds of what the film codes as "Indian" tradition. They obey and respect their parents. They dress in native costume. They speak both a local dialect and Spanish. Within the confines of their home, they live peacefully and lovingly.

However, the family's security ends when Arturo goes to a clandestine organizing meeting. That night the military, summoned by the plantation overseer, massacres the coffee pickers and behead Arturo. Enrique, hearing gunfire, runs out into the darkness of the village and discovers his father's head hanging from a tree; he kills one of the soldiers from the patrol. The next day the military returns to exterminate all families suspected of rebellion. The mother is taken away. The orphaned fugitives, Enrique and Rosa, must flee "north."

In this first episode, Nava paints a picture of solidarity within the Indian culture, among family members (Enrique and Rosa vow never to separate), among extended family members (Rosa's godmother gives them her life-savings to finance their escape) and among the community of workers (who by meeting that night had sacrificed their lives for the good of the community). These relations set up the viewer to be emotionally manipulated throughout the film, as s/he faces the contradiction between the nobility of the Indian people and the devastation that continuously befalls them. By the end of EL NORTE, Rosa dies of typhus in a Los Angeles hospital bed, leaving Enrique totally alone, facing a future of humiliating day labor and hopelessness. In narrative terms, the plot set up a final irony: Enrique gave up a chance to get a green card in order to stay by his dying sister's bedside. Living by his sense of duty to his family caused his ruin in terms of what the film posits as security and economic success.

The film establishes a close relation between brother and sister, one of true sharing and intense emotion. This relation is foregrounded by the melodramatic style and is often juxtaposed against corrupted relations among Hispanics. Such a contrast is intended to emphasize the strain on social interaction produced by the economics of immigration.

The second episode, called "Coyote," shows Enrique and Rosa trying to cross the

border at Tijuana. Coyotes are men who profit from helping people cross, often robbing, raping, or shooting customers as they lead them through the isolated mountain passes. When Enrique and Rosa cross, the coyote attacks them. The fight, however, is interrupted by the U.S. border patrol, who sends the Guatemalans back to Tijuana where the two finally find an honest coyote. But even though the second coyote seems a friend, underlying economic considerations still influence his behavior. When the three arrive in L.A., the coyote sells Enrique and Rosa's labor power to a seedy Chicano middleman, Don Mojte, for seventy-five dollars. Don Mojte, in turn, profits by placing the two in low paying jobs and taking their wages as rent. This structure depicts the economic exploitation of one Hispanic by another, and it stands in sharp contrast to the solidarity within the Indian village.

While such observations reflect social reality, the highly emotional melodramatic structure simply expresses pathos about these strained social relations and loss of tradition. Is it sufficient just to show how the Mexican or Chicano gets his cut?[7] couldn't EL NORTE have offered a deeper analysis of the situation? In what ways would such a narrative change require varying melodrama's linear structure and emphasis on simply good vs. evil?

Nava does play with structure by dividing the film into short self-contained segments, each introduced with intertitles and bracketed by fades. This episodic format works somewhat to distanciate the audience. Nevertheless, it does not really stimulate the viewer to reflect upon the social reality portrayed. Instead, it functions to reduce each segment to the status of a parable or fairytale. It diffuses important relationships set up in each episode as the next one follows. In particular, it prevents the audience from making meaningful causal connections between the situation of oppression in Guatemala and the economic situation of immigrants in the United States.

In terms of the protagonists' development, such a segmented form of the film insinuates that what happened in the first and second episodes — the murder in the village and the escape through Mexico — has become part of their life that is better left in the past. Nava thus shifts our attention from asking why the two were forced into lamentable state, here in the U.S., to a question of how they might obtain the same economic freedom as the white middle class. By the third episode, the past becomes represented by surreal flourishes and exotic images (Rosa hallucinates that her father brings her a basket of flowers with a dead fish in it) which allude emotionally to but do not explain the past as it directly relates to the present. Rather, by flashing back to random, unexplained images supposedly from the past, viewers are encouraged to make overbroad connections and generalizations: e.g., "Indian life is mysterious," or, "Poor people become exploited in both their society and ours by the rich (by implication, exploitation is 'natural')."

The melodrama builds upon a subtext of the *norte* as the promised land. This

theme further complicates the viewer's understanding the historical and material relations between what happened in Guatemala and the characters' present life in the U.S. In the first episode, *el norte* seems a land of opportunity, a place where Rosa's godmother always dreamed of going. When Rosa and Enrique finally get to San Diego, we see an aerial shot at night, a magnificent panorama accompanied by a majestic symphony. In the characters' eyes, this shot indicates that the U.S. is a place where their dreams can come true.

Upon their arrival in L.A., the two are willing and proud to do menial labor because they see the opportunity for promotion and advancement, which was not available to them on the coffee plantation. Because of their "work ethic" (what amounts to willingness to knuckle under to white, middle-class supervisors) neither of them goes long without work. Enrique even gets promoted ahead of senior employees after working only a short time. The characters' work ethic impels them to take English classes in which they excel. Finally, Enrique is offered a foreman's job and a chance for a green card. Opportunity clearly awaits him. Thus, the story line establishes that the tragedy is not that he will work at menial labor, but that he must choose to be a laborer instead of a foreman because he will not abandon his sister for the new job (i.e., he clings to his cultural tradition). Eventually, the initial concept of "self respect — set up when Enrique's father spoke of a man needing to work his own land — becomes distorted into another notion: that, in the U.S., Enrique can gain "self-respect" by exchanging his role as exploited laborer for one of greater relative economic power. Ultimately, the film confuses the important sociopolitical concerns of the Guatemalan Indian population (economic self-determination without exploitation, cultural preservation) with capitalist notions of success, never truly challenging oppressive conditions here or in Guatemala.

In the case of *EL NORTE*, any attempt to understand the causes of exploitation becomes hindered by the use of a stereotyped villain, the U.S. Immigration Service. The Immigration Service's threat overrides any possibility for openly depicting the causal connections between the military threat in Guatemala and Rosa's tragic death from typhus at the end. We see how the two siblings are able to safely cross into Mexico, but when they try to enter the U.S., they must crawl through a rat-infested sewage pipe in order to avoid capture by U.S. authorities. From the rats, Rosa contracts typhus, but she does not seek medical treatment because of fears that she'll be deported.

Within the constraints of the melodrama, this concentration on the lives of the two ghettoized siblings takes on the characteristics of a love story. It saturates us with their love and devotion, with the Immigration Service as the ever-present threat to their love. Thus the story line obscures the initial focus of the tragedy of a family and of a *pueblo* living in constant threat of extermination. *EL NORTE* shifts to a different social message: we should accept all Latino immigrants because they are warm and loving people and good hard workers. Their countries are too corrupt for them to live in and, besides, they'll suffer any danger or humiliation to get across

the border to live in the United States. The threat of deportation is the film's villain. The final implication is that hard-working men like Enrique could indeed succeed within this economic system if a few bad employers could not hold the threat of deportation over their heads.

What begins as a story of two Guatemalan Indians becomes a melodramatic parable of all immigrants who have come from and remain in poverty. Yet, for all the references to poverty, the meaning of poverty within the film remains ambiguous. Early on, for instance, Arturo Xuncax tells his son that in their country, the rich own all the good land and poor work like beasts of burden upon that land. The film assigns the cause of poverty within Guatemala to evil landowners who are never seen. They are an absent threat, yet they are the only subjects the film blames for the people's poverty. By locating the source of oppression in an overly stereotyped notion of the landowner, the film confuses the issue of economic impoverishment of the Third World and especially does not deal with imperialism. Arturo's emotional speeches and those of his children are only broad clichés.[8] The film clings to the melodramatic form and its reductionistic treatment of social issues. Thus, it discourages a more penetrating analysis of prolonged impoverishment in the Third World, especially the implications of U.S. monetary aid and economic investment. Consequently, the film also avoids confronting/ alienating the upper-middle class audiences who populate art house cinemas and subscribe to cable Arts and Entertainment television. It is this audience that (perhaps unknowingly) invests in the companies that lobby the government to keep the Guatemalan army supplied and trained. And it is this same audience that profits from the submissive work force with which impoverished Central America provides them. But poverty is coded in *EL NORTE* as a state of disgrace that has befallen Central America because of those countries' internal corruption. Salvation for the immigrants can be bestowed by letting them enter the U.S. freely, without threat of deportation. This kind of conflict resolution is sale for U.S. viewers. It allows for our emotional involvement and identification with the impoverished immigrant while never exposing the contradictory position we are enmeshed in as U.S. citizens, when our government and our economic system are largely responsible for Guatemala's condition in the first place. This type of conflict resolution promotes an attitude of tolerance. Herbert Marcuse has explained how such an attitude, in fact, derives from the very causes of oppression:

"...the conditons of tolerance are loaded: they are determined and defined by the institutional inequality...It is of two kinds: (1) the passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident; and (2) the active, official tolerance granted to the Right as well as the Left, to movements of aggression as well as to movements of peace, to the party of hate as to that of humanity...In doing so it actually protects the already established machinery of discrimination.[9]

By couching the story of the Guatemalan immigrant in the emotional clichés of

melodrama, toleration and not confrontation becomes the mode of address the North American viewer is encouraged to adapt. Consequently, the film evokes sympathy, but true understanding and radical alternatives are avoided.

Guatemalan and some other Latino viewers, especially refugees, will probably not have the same response that I have described. As Brecht said, the exile is the only true dialectician. The film's clichéd dialogue and stereotyped situations can work as cues to call up lived experience, which itself offers the oppressed a deeper understanding of their situation. For the Guatemalan, the absent landowner and the word poverty are not ambiguous terms. By bringing outside information to the viewing of the film, the exile can supplement the narrative, discard the ideological position of toleration advocated by the text and, in a sense, reread the film as the chronicle of the sufferings of the Central American refugee in general. This would also permit an alternative reading of the last scene of the film — a shot of Enrique doing humiliating day labor followed by a flashback to the head of his father hanging from a tree. According to the film's ideology of toleration, we would interpret this as saying we should allow Enrique to live freely in the U.S. so that he will not have to submit to the barbarity of his own people. But the Guatemalan, taking lived experience as a point of departure, might offer a contradictory reading, interpreting the images as juxtaposing the son's exploitation in the U.S. with the father's in Guatemala, as linking the entire system of oppression to the dominant class' economic and political interests in *both* countries.[10]

I believe that such a reading can only come from an informed viewer. But such informed viewing becomes restricted by conventional modes of distribution and consumption.[11] From a standpoint of making an ideological critique of *EL NORTE*, those of us working in the Latino community must ask ourselves about the value of this film as an example of Latino cinema. Is an attitude of toleration enough? Should Latino cinema in the U.S. follow in the footsteps of their *compañeros* in Latin America as an alternative cinema? As Latinos in the cities are beginning to grow in political power, now, especially, is the time for filmmakers to broaden their perspective.

NOTES

1. Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Latin Portrayals in Film and Television," *Jump Cut*, No. 30 (March, 1985), p. 14.
2. Distribution and exhibition of subtitled or dubbed foreign productions would also be a significant factor in ensuring adequacy of representation.
3. Of Mexican-American heritage, Nava has identified himself with the concerns of Chicano Cinema in interviews.
4. Since I originally wrote this paper, *LA BAMBAA*, *BORN IN EAST LA* and *STAND AND DELIVER* have been financially successful. These films offer a welcomed

improvement in the industry's treatment of Latinos yet still represent a relatively small adjustment in the long history of exploitation carried out by an ethnocentric Hollywood system. For a brief overview of the proposed objectives of the Chicano Cinema Movement see Jesus Salvador Trevino, "Form and Technique in Chicano Cinema" as well as other articles in Gary Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema* (Binghamton: Bilingual Review Press, 1985) and Jason C. Johansen, "Notes on Chicano Cinema," JUMP CUT, No. 23 (October, 1980), 9.

5. In SANTA a young girl is forced to leave her family and *pueblo* to work as a prostitute in Mexico City after a military man seduces her. Eventually she dies of cancer, an outcast even from her brothel, because she has been too sick to work.

6. Enrique Colina and Daniel Diaz Torres, "Ideology of Melodrama in the Old Latin American Cinema," *Cine Cubano*, translated and reprinted in *Latin American Filmmakers and the Third Cinema*, Zuzana Pick ed. (Ottawa: Carlton University, 1978).

7. Joel Oseas Perez argues that the characters of the *coyotes* and Don Mojte are too one dimensional and ultimately promote negative stereotypes of Mexicans and Chicanos. See "EL NORTE: Imagenes peryorativas de Mexico y los chicanos," *Chiricu*, 5:1 (1987).

8. For a general analysis of the economic and political situation in Guatemala, see Jonathon Fried, ed., *Guatemala in Rebellion* (NY: Grove Press, 1983).

9. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 84-85. 10. This interpretation ignores another possible ending for the film, one which Nava never confronts. Instead of placing Enrique in a passive, fatalistic role, Nava could have had him return to Guatemala and join the revolutionary forces. For an account of the role of the Indian population in the Guatemalan revolutionary process see *I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984).

11. This point was confirmed in March, 1987 when EL NORTE played on Chicago PBS. It was introduced as a film about Guatemalans who decide to immigrate to the U.S. because of arguments over land currently taking place in that country. This reductionistic explanation of the Guatemalan political situation angered Guatemalan refugee groups who responded with phone calls of protest against the announcer and the station.

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