**Video Script**

**Chicano Cinema**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Hello everyone, and welcome to the second lecture in Indie Cultures week. Today, we’ll be focusing on the revolutionary, radical roots of Chicano cinema.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts, and I realize this is a longer list than usual. That’s because it’s impossible to divorce Chicano cinema from Chicano history—so we need concepts that will teach us about both topics.

**Chon Noriega**

For this lecture, I’m drawing heavily on the work of Dr. Chon A. Noriega. He’s a professor of film, television, and digital media at UCLA, and he’s an expert in this field.

**Books**

I’m working from these two books: *Shot in America* and *Chicanos and Film*, both of which are fundamental to the study of Mexican American media.

Further, I’d just like to point out before we get going that our very own RTF department has an upper division class next semester on Chicano cinema with our own in-house expert, Dr. Mirasol Enriquez. So, if this is a topic that’s of interest to you—check it out! I wish I could take that class.

**Protest**

If we talk about the history of Chicano art, we could go back a thousand years. But if we’re thinking about *cinema*, we’re thinking about the 20th century. And we need to start not with art, but with politics, because as you’ll see, Chicano film culture is activist by nature. It emerges from, and is inextricably linked to, 1960s/1970s activism.

In fact, that’s what you see in this photograph. This is a group of folks protesting outside a theater showing the 1979 film *Boulevard Nights*, about gangs in East Los Angeles, who said that it stereotyped life in that neighborhood and Mexican-Americans in general.

**Bracero program**

So, let’s do a little bit of political history—and I promise, all of these dots will eventually connect. We’re going to begin with the bracero program or **[ANIMATION]** an economic agreement negotiated between Mexico, the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (which is what we had before they invented ICE in 2003).

The point of this agreement was to bring millions of Mexican men into the United States on short-term, predominantly agricultural work contracts. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million such work contracts were signed, with some men returning to the U.S. multiple times.

**Bracero (Noriega quote)**

Here’s what Chon Noriega, the scholar whose work I’m drawing on, had to say about the bracero program.

*…the “bracero solution” also contributed to a broader public discourse—circulating within the news and entertainment media and defining social relations—that “deterritorialized” Mexicans and Mexican Americans within the United States even as it also acknowledged the economic necessity of their presence. In other words, “Mexicans” were discursively removed from the body politic in terms of civil rights and citizenship, while their physical presence was understood and accepted on the basis of an economic rationale.”*

Now, what does that mean? Fear not, I’m going to break it down.

**Deterritorialization.**

To understand what Dr. Noriega means here, we need to understand that word he used: deterritorialization. That’s the separation of social, cultural, and political practices (such as people, objects, languages, or traditions) from a location. Dr. Noriega is saying that the bracero program did exactly this: it displaced Mexican society and culture from Mexico. In turn, the U.S. government and Anglo society and culture responds by accepting Mexican labor…but rejecting Mexican workers and their culture as *not* American—they’re other, they’re “foreign.”

**Bracero Archive (1)**

UCLA has an amazing archive of bracero history, a lot of which has been digitized. I’ve included a link for you in the additional links section of the module for today. Here’s one image from that archive, of an agricultural worker…

**Bracero Archive (2)**

…and here’s another, of a worker’s children, sent to him in California when he was working there on a contract, away from his family.

**Chavez**

Along with all the other social change we talked about in the 1960s, there was a huge boom in Chicano activism during that decade, a lot of which was focused on the rights of agricultural workers. Here, you see Cesar Chavez, civil rights leader, labor activist, and co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association, which eventually became United Farm Workers, who represented and bargained for thousands of workers in California and Florida.

**Huerta**

And here, you see activist Dolores Huerta, the other co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association, who is still alive and still a powerful activist for change. She said something that I think about often when I’m feeling tired or politically hopeless, which is: “Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world.”

**Delano**

One of the many nonviolent protests organized by the UFW—or at least, one of the most enduring and most visible—was the Delano grape strike. They were fighting for better wages and more rights for workers who picked grapes in California and they orchestrated five-year national boycott of non-union grapes. Five years is a really long time, when you think about it. Think about how quickly activist actions move through our consciousness now. But their incredible commitment worked, and the grape workers won a collective bargaining agreement.

**Chicano Blowouts**

But farmworkers aren’t the only Mexican Americans organizing in the 1960s. The Chicano Blowouts, also known as the East L.A. Walkouts, were a series of protests in 1968 by Chicano high school students in Los Angeles.

**Chicano Blowouts (2)**

What were they demanding? More equitable resources for their schools, and a curriculum that addressed (not denigrated) their history. I’ve included a short documentary about these protests in the additional links, too.

**Frito Bandito**

Okay, and *here* is where we begin to get to the media—but we’re going to do it through activism. As you can see here, media representation of Mexican Americans in the 1960s was poor, to say the least. This is an image of the Frito Bandito, a stereotypical Frito-Lay campaign that they ran from 1967 to 1971. I’ve included a commercial in the links if want to check it out, but if you don’t…trust, me, it’s *exactly* what you think it is.

**IMAGE & NMAADC**

In response to this and other bigoted and belittling stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in media and advertising, two advocacy groups were formed. The first, IMAGE, was founded here in in Texas, in San Antonio. The other, the National Mexican American Anti-Defamation Committee was based in Washington D.C.. Both wrote letters, held press conferences, and threatened boycotts, all in the name of better representation of Mexican folks and other Latinx people in advertising and broader media.

**Quotes**

Okay, so why does all of this political, cultural, and social activism matter? Because *Chicano cinema arises alongside and from this movement*. It’s a way to communicate the sense of culture that was solidified through these protests.

**[ANIMATION]** Dr. Noriega argues that Chicano cinema has had to “mark out a space for itself between a weapon and a formula, between the political weapon of New Latin American cinema, and the economic formula of Hollywood.”

Now, I think we understand what he means by the formula. We know enough now about Hollywood to understand that its greatest goal is profit, right? And that to reap profits, Hollywood tends to make the same, surefire films over and over—it’s what we talked about in our lecture on the calculated blockbuster—aimed at the same people and audiences, over and over.

**[ANIMATION]** The weapon part might not be so clear, though. By “the political weapon of New Latin American cinema,” Dr. Noriega is referring to a wave of explicitly political films emerging from Cuba, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil in the 1970s. This movement is also sometimes called “Third Cinema.” Its goal was to tie filmmaking to the cause of revolution. These films were meant to be non-commercial, they rejected filmmaking as means of individual expression, and they considered their true goal to speak for and about the masses in service of liberation.

**Johansen**

Let’s think about how Chicano cinema resembles the “weapon” side of that equation first. In 1979, Jason C. Johansen published a manifesto about Chicano cinema. (Incidentally, this is your reading for this lecture.) A manifesto is a declaration of beliefs, goals, and policy—so, this manifesto about Chicano cinema includes everything he thinks Chicano films should do and be.

**[ANIMATION]** Johansen’s manifesto rejects Hollywood film as the cinema of the ruling class, and instead argues that Chicano film should be made by and for the community. So, he’s kind of aligning it with those goals of New Latin American cinema, which was all about the collective.

**[ANIMATION]** His manifesto also lays out six pillars that Chicano cinema should strive to accomplish:

1. It should demystify film for its audiences and bring the filmmaking process to the people
2. It should decolonize minds and reaffirm Chicano culture
3. It should be reflective and open-ended instead of telling viewers what to think
4. Its goal should be altering consciousness—here, meaning political awareness
5. It should effect social change; film should be a part of the “revolutionary process”
6. It should develop its own film language

In all, Johansen is saying that Chicano cinema should be made by Chicanos and serve their liberation. It’s a political weapon, and it’s got all the same radical goals as the activism of farm workers and high school students we talked about earlier.

**Stand and Deliver**

And radical Chicano filmmakers made films like this, for two decades! But Hollywood didn’t learn to apply its formula to this market unti 1987-1988, when it released four Chicano-Latino feature films like the one seen here, *Stand and Deliver*. This mini wave was often referred to as “Hispanic Hollywood,” and as you can tell from that language, it didn’t draw on the history of Chicano cinema—which was about the political needs of Mexican Americans. This wave of “Hispanic” films lumped all kinds of Latinx folks into one bucket and recognized them as an untapped *market*.

**Quote (Noriega)**

Dr. Noriega finally argues that the interesting thing about Chicano cinema is that, in fact, it *combines* these two ideas—the political weapon, and the financial formula for profit. Chicano cinema has often found a way to create popular, mainstream films that remain faithful to the political and artistic goals of Johansen’s manifesto.

**Luis Valdez**

In order to see this weapon/formula dynamic at work, there’s no one whose career is more helpful to observe than Luis Valdez. Valdez is a playwright and filmmaker who was born to migrant farm workers in Delano—same Delano from the grape strike. He himself began working in agricultural fields at age six. He went on to college, but returned to Delano after he graduated in 1965.

**Teatro Campesino**

In Delano, he enlists in Chavez and Huerta’s mission to organize farm workers into a comprehensive union. Valdez’s contribution was to bring together farm workers and students to form **[ANIMATION]** El Teatro Campesino, which was a farm workers’ theater troupe. They were known for touring migrant camps with their *actos*, or one-act plays that were usually around fifteen minutes long.

**[ANIMATION]** The plays were used to educate and inform not only the farm workers, but also the public, about workers’ rights. They were often quite funny, with the twin goals of educating and lifting spirits; social and political commentary was intertwined within that humor. The earliest plays put on by El Teatro were based on the experiences of farm workers, but by 1967 their subject matter had expanded to talk about other aspects of Chicano culture too.

**I Am Joaquin**

So, in 1969, Valdez makes the jump to film. He makes this film called *I Am Joaquin,* and it’s almost like a cinema poem—in fact, its script is a popular poem written by Rodolfo Gonzales. You’ll watch this film as part of this module. It’s this uplifting, community-bolstering piece about Chicano identity, with all kinds of images of people and this bracing, exhilarating voice over.

As a side note, it’s also a little masculinist—not so many women are featured in the film. And Chicana writers and filmmakers have even made responses to it.

Regardless, the film is clearly on the “weapon” side of Noriega’s formula, and aligned with the goals of New Latin American cinema. It’s not meant to be profitable, and its tied to the goals of justice and liberation and Chicano pride.

**Zoot Suit**

Valdez eventually lands in Hollywood, though. In 1981 he makes a film called *Zoot Suit* based on his play of the same name. The story revolves around the real-life events of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, when a bunch of young Mexican Americans were charged with murder, resulting in the racially-fueled Zoot Suit Riots throughout L.A. in the 1940s. It’s a story about race and ethnicity in Los Angeles.

The film is released by Universal Pictures…but as its digested and excreted through the Hollywood marketing machine, its presented to the public as a gang film. It’s more like *West Side Story*, not this tale of an uprising.

With *Zoot Suit*, you can see the negotiation a Chicano film has to make between the weapon and the formula—while the film is still quite political, it is marketed in a way that masks is politics. In exchange, though, it reaches a wider audience.

**La Bamba**

And in 1987, Valdez makes *La Bamba*, perhaps his most famous film. It’s a biopic about Chicano rock and roll star Ritchie Valens..

**La Bamba (gifs)**

..played by a glorious young Lou Diamond Phillips. The film is filled with Valens’s music and the soundtrack is filled with even greater cover versions by Chicano rock band Los Lobos. But in the weapon vs. formula equation, where would you place this? Can you still see both elements? Is there overt political art here? Is it just out and out profit? Or, as Dr. Noriega said, is it the latter in order advance the former? Is it a feel-good biopic in order to tell the story of a Chicano life, which is an extremely rare occurrence, if not a Hollywood first?

**Concepts**

There’s another way to think about the blending of weapon and formula—or the significance of blending in general to Chicano cinema. That’s the concept of *mestizaje*, or kind of roughly, a sense of mixed-ness. Let me explain a little more.

**[ANIMATION]** Scholars say that there are three defining elements of Chicano art beyond and including cinema: resistance to domination by Anglo culture, maintenance of traditions and connections, and affirmation of identity.

**[ANIMATION]** Dr. Noriega suggests a fourth element found in Chicano art and culture made from the 1980s on, and that’s *mestizaje*. People originally used the idea of *mestizaje* to talk about what it meant to be Mexican—that what made Mexico *Mexico* was the mixing of Spanish and indigenous cultures. Artists and thinkers took this concept and ran with it. Now, Chicano scholars, Chicano artists, Chicano filmmakers, think of *mestizaje* as a tool to deconstruct the notion of a dominant culture entirely. What does that mean in practical terms? It means embracing the idea of border culture, and creating art about deterritorialization, and telling stories about people who create new ways of living between two cultures. And in a way, that mixing of weapon and formula, of New Latin American ideas and Hollywood ideas, is part of that ethos of *mestizaje*.

**Ibarra**

The second filmmaker I want to talk about to help us understand *mestizaje* is Cristina Ibarra. She’s an RTF alum and a documentary filmmaker, and her work specifically looks at the border between Texas and Mexico, trying to illuminate the particularities of border life.

**Las Marthas**

Her 2014 documentary *Las Marthas* uses a Laredo/Nuevo Laredo pageant to examine border culture. (Students always perk up when I mention this—I always have one or two in the class from that area and yes, there was a documentary about this if you haven’t seen it!)

**The Infiltrators**

And I want to call attention to her boundary-breaking documentary *The Infiltrators*, which she made with her partner Alex Rivera in what they call a “hybrid cinematic language,” combining documentary with scripted narrative. It tells the story of a group of undocumented activists who get detained by ICE on purpose to organize inside detention centers.

And, I can’t believe it, but I’ve actually found a legitimate option for you to stream this film for free! I’ll link that in the module for you.

**Public Broadcasting**

The last point I want to make about Chicano cinema—especially because it’s related to this week’s screening—is its connection to public broadcasting.

**[ANIMATION]** Just like it served as a training ground for the L.A. Rebellion, UCLA also served as a jumping-off point for a whole host of Chicano filmmakers in the 1970s. Public television—which had been responsive to media activism from groups like IMAGE and NMAADC—was willing to commission and broadcast their work. This collaborative relationship between Chicano filmmakers and PBS exists to this day; Ibarra’s work, for example, often appears on PBS.

**El Norte**

That relationship brought us your screening for this week, which is Gregory Nava’s 1984 film *El Norte*, though Nava is more famous for a little 1996 film you might know called *Selena*. *El Norte*  was financed through a combination of PBS funding and European pre-sales.

**El Norte (2)**

It’s the story of a brother and sister who flee violence in Guatemala, spend much of the film travelling through Mexico, where they want to cross the border into the United States.

**[ANIMATION]** Film critic Roger Ebert called it “the first film to approach the subject of undocumented workers solely through their own eyes.”

Anecdotally, this is the film students tend to respond most strongly to in RTF 308. It’s harrowing at times, but its opening scenes in particular are filled with some gorgeous imagery. And, in the spirit of Chicano cinema’s pillar of being “reflective and open-ended,” it has a somewhat cryptic last image that will stay with you. I hope you enjoy it, and I’ll be back with one more lecture in our Indie series on Austin’s own film culture.